

David Hamlin. *The Nazi/Skokie Conflict: A Civil Liberties Battle*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980) 184 pp., \$12.95.

David Hamlin, the Executive Director of the Illinois American Civil Liberties Union at the time, recounts in this book the story of the battle over attempts by the National Socialist Party of America, led by John Collin, to hold a demonstration in Skokie, Illinois, in 1977. To the ACLU, this was a “classic First Amendment case” (p. 53) of the sort it has regularly handled, but it developed into a *cause célèbre* which eventually resulted in temporary damage to the ACLU in Illinois and the nation. A straightforward, factual account, unfortunately without footnotes, which tries to describe all aspects of the conflict, the book is written in a lucid style.

The civil liberties position was vindicated in this instance; both the Illinois Supreme Court and a federal district court upheld freedom of speech, the ACLU suffered no permanent damage and, as Hamlin argues, “Only Frank Collin lost.” (p. 176) Far from advancing the cause of neo-Nazi advocates of racial and religious hatred, the incident revealed how little support Collin and his tiny band actually had. The refusal of the Skokie city council to grant a routine permit guaranteed the Nazis much more publicity than they could have received otherwise, yet this greater notoriety produced rejection for their views, not support. When the “demonstrations” were finally held in Federal Plaza and Marquette Park in Chicago, the few Nazis were faced with thousands of counterdemonstrators and the police were there to protect them.

In the end, the incident provided evidence that virulent anti-Semitism is extremely unpopular in the United States today, evidence which would not have existed if the purveyors of hate had been suppressed. Needless to say, this function of free speech for the utterances we hate has been one of the classic arguments for unfettered expression.

Nevertheless, aspects of the incident are disturbing. First, although presumably mostly a matter of individual pathology, there is the fact that Frank Collin was born Frank Cohn, the son of a Holocaust survivor. Hamlin suggests more confidence in understanding this fact than seems to be justified; he says that Collin is compelled to create a private illusion which “exists because Frank Collin is, by his own stated definition, his own worst enemy. It is because Frank Collin is also Frank Cohn that this inept, unimposing failure wraps himself in the fabric of fabrication—cloaks himself in the trappings of nazism—and creates an illusion in which Frank Collin-Cohn seems to become everything, literally *everything*, he is not.” (p. 8) Students of ethnic relations may conclude that Collin-Cohn is a victim of the self-hate which is one response to oppression by its victims.

Second, there is the question why “Collin caused the Jewish community [of Skokie] to panic.” (p. 99) The city council of Skokie at first did not panic, and David Goldberger, the Jewish counsel for the ACLU who had defended the Nazis before and never wavered in his knowledge of his duty, did not panic, and ultimately the course upheld the Constitution. But when the city council asked the churches of Skokie to discuss the issue, the response from the synagogues was so irrational that the sensible course, ignoring the Nazis, became impossible. Frank Collin and his wretched band were never a threat to the Jewish community but many members of that community, which included Holocaust survivors, thought that they were. Hamlin was in no position to know much about the internal dynamics of the Skokie Jewish community and his book offers little which can help explain their reaction, but clearly the scars from the Holocaust were deeper and less healed than we might have thought. Some members of that community argued in court that any discussion of the Holocaust in public would cause “mencicide,” or “the willful infliction of emotional harm.” (pp. 104-105) Once again, however, the outcome seemed to vindicate the position of civil libertarians. While the controversy was going on, the television production on the Holocaust was shown; clearly, intelligent and sensitive discussion of even the most horrible events can have beneficial effects.

There is an index, but no illustrations except a dust jacket photograph of Hamlin.

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