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"I Hate Illinois Nazis:" Remembering Hate Speech and the First Amendment in Skokie, Illinois

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“I Hate Illinois Nazis:” Remembering Hate Speech and the First Amendment in Skokie, Illinois

ABSTRACT

In 1976, the leader of the Illinois chapter of the National Socialist Party of America (neo-Nazis) sent over 30 requests to hold demonstrations in various areas of Chicago. The village of Skokie was the only one to respond, denying their request. The Nazis sued the city, claiming their freedom of speech was being impeded. The resulting court case has had lasting legal and social consequences that continue to define the meaning of both free speech and hate speech in the United States.

BACKGROUND: SKOKIE AND NAZIS IN THE 1970'S

Following the end of World War II, a large number of European Jews immigrated to Chicago, and by the 1950's many had moved to the suburbs like Skokie. Skokie's population reached 70,000 in the mid-1970's, and nearly half of these residents were Jewish; 7,000 were Holocaust survivors.

At this time, neo-Nazis were common in the Chicago area. Dubbed the “Nazi neighborhood,” Marquette Park on the southwest side of Chicago housed the National Socialist Party of America's headquarters and was known for anti-Semitism.

THE ATTEMPTED MARCH

In October of 1976, Frank Collin, leader of the neo-Nazis in the Chicago area, requested to hold demonstrations in over 30 communities. They wanted to stand outside city halls in Nazi uniforms with Swastika memorabilia, signs, and pro-white chants. Most ignored them, but Skokie refused. The community was outraged and officials tried every legal device to block the march. They felt this was a personal attack against the many Jews and Holocaust survivors in their community.

Aside from legal methods, Skokie residents held anti-Nazi protests to show both disdain for the Nazis and support for Jewish friends and neighbors. However, numerous people also threatened violence if they saw the Nazis in the streets.

THE LAWSUIT AND COURT CASE

After Collin had been turned away, he called David Goldberger, a Jewish lawyer for the ACLU of Illinois. Much to the surprise and anger of many ACLU members, Goldberger accepted the case. He said that although he does not agree with the Nazi message, this was a clear violation of the First Amendment and free speech. The Village of Skokie v. the National Socialist Party of America hit the courts. The case went through county court, state appellate court, Illinois Supreme Court, and finally reached the United States Supreme Court.



Nazi leader Frank Collin, pictured center, with the swastika armband leads helmeted members of the National Socialist Party of America give the Fascist salute during a rally in downtown Chicago, June 24, 1978. - AP

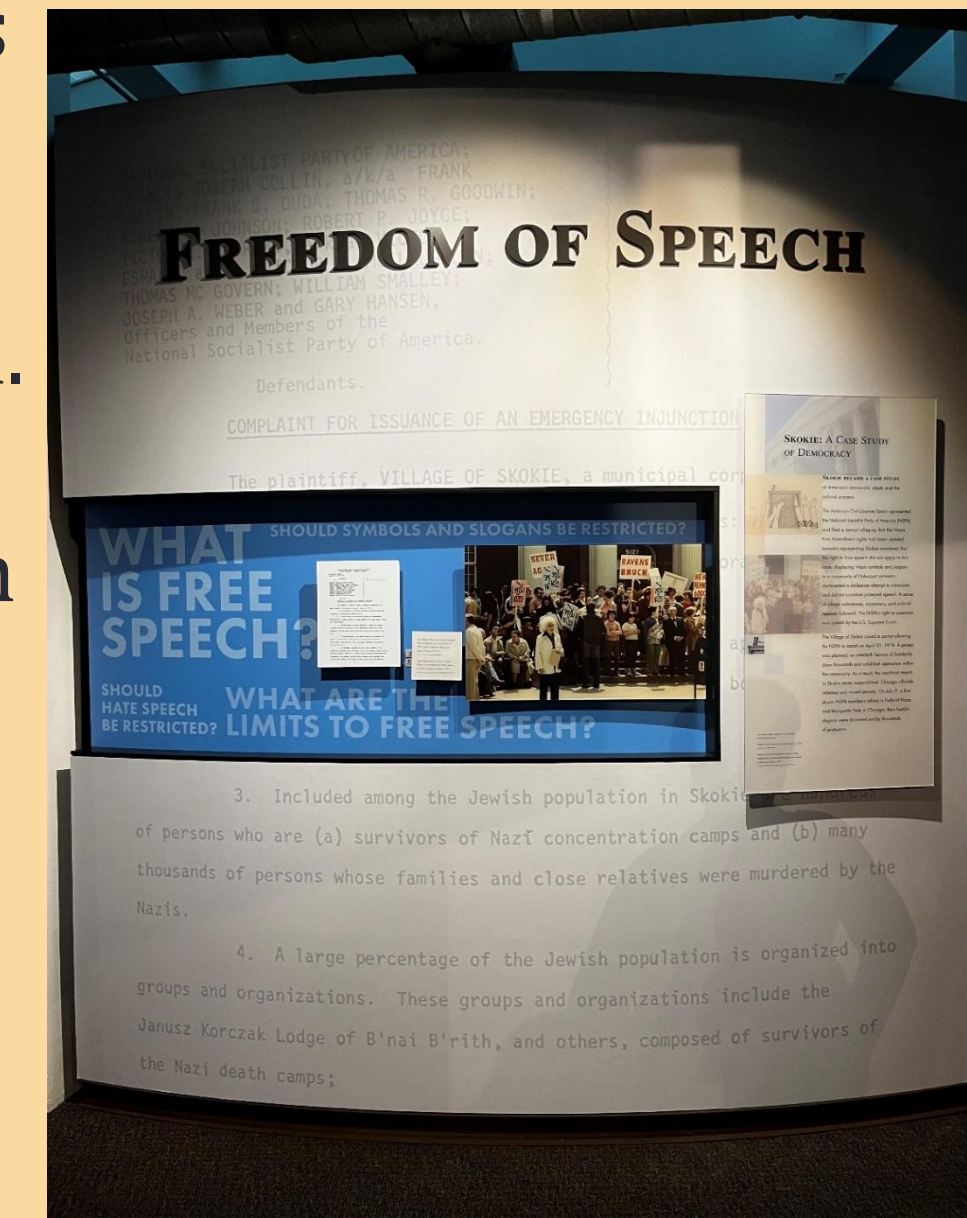
The Supreme Court forced Illinois courts to make a decision, and eventually, Skokie was found to be in violation. The neo-Nazis were allowed to march in Skokie, but went to Chicago instead in fear of violence. The courts found that Swastikas did not constitute fighting words, and that the government could not decide what was considered safe under freedom of speech. This case is still a precedent used today.



A large group of anti-Nazi protestors demonstrate at a park in Skokie, IL July 4, 1977 - AP

SOCIAL IMPACT

In 1981, planning for the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Educational Center began, and in 2009, its doors finally opened. The museum is an immersive, experience that takes visitors on a chronological tour of Jewish life before Nazism, during its rise, the Holocaust, and the years after. Its aim is to encourage visitors to learn through empathy and facts. This includes a section on Skokie and the meaning of free speech.



An exhibit highlighting the meaning of freedom of speech at the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Educational Center, Skokie, IL

The 1980 film *The Blues Brothers* is a comedy starring John Belushi and Dan Akyroyd as musical brothers, determined to get back to playing music with their band. One of the antagonists of the film is a group of Illinois Nazis. In an iconic scene, the brothers see the Nazis protesting in a Chicago suburb. One brother says, “I hate Illinois Nazis” and they use their Bluesmobile to run the Nazi protestors off a bridge.

THEN AND NOW

Carl Cohen and other scholars of the 1970's and 80's saw the Skokie case as the ultimate test of the United States' commitment to free speech. By allowing Nazis to speak, no matter how offensive they were, ensured that everyone had the right to free speech. This is still the argument today when courts cite the Skokie decision. Most people dislike Nazis and their hate speech, but by protecting their first amendment rights, everyone's rights are protected. This precedent makes sure the government cannot ban ideas with which they do not agree. The lawsuit, media, and museum connected to Skokie have shaped the meaning of hate speech in the United States in both the legal and social sense.

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