

When the Nazis Come to Town: Action and Reaction in the Jewish Community

Lawrence Rubin, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Philadelphia

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Between Wednesday, February 14 and Friday, February 23, 1979, the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Philadelphia was deeply involved with what appeared to be an effort by the American Nazi movement, abetted by elements of the Ku Klux Klan, to hold a "white power rally" within the Independence Hall National Historical Park. Though ultimately providing to be a hoax allegedly perpetrated by an individual with connections to the Jewish Defense League, the response of the JCRC in dealing both with the situation and also the community's emotions elicited by it may prove useful to other community relations professionals and communal leaders who find themselves confronted by similar threatening prospects.

A Summary of the Facts

On Wednesday, February 14th (Valentine's Day, ironically) an individual using the name James Guttmann applied for a permit for the American Nazi Party to hold a "white power rally" at the Judge Lewis Quadrangle within the Independence National Historic Park on either Tuesday or Wednesday of the following week. Guttmann indicated on his permit application that Frank Collin, the Nazi leader from Chicago, would be attending the rally. (Collin's phone number appears on the application.) Guttmann indicated that 100 "of us" would attend the rally, adding parenthetically that an unknown number of "niggers and Jews" would probably show up.

The following morning, a person claiming to be Guttmann called the Park Service and indicated that he was no longer sure of the date

for the rally and would reschedule it, possible for Sunday, February 25th, after discussing the matter with "higher ups." At that point, the February 14th application was considered "void" by Hobart Cawood, Superintendent of the Independence National Historical Park.

On Friday, February 16th, an individual carrying the identification of one James Guttmann reapplied for a permit for Sunday, February 25th. This time, the application listed a South Jersey KKK leader, Ed Reynolds, as the contact at the rally and gave Reynolds' phone number. The application also noted that a cross would be burned and that signs would be carried that said, among other things, "Gas Commie Jews" and "Hitler Was Right."

At the same time, a local survivors group, the Association of Jewish New Americans, went into court seeking an injunction to prohibit the National Park Service from issuing a permit to the Nazis for a rally on the grounds that it would cause members of the group severe psychological and even physical harm and it is unlawful to allow federal property to be used for the solicitation of a crime (e.g., the gassing of Jews).

Following intense discussions with his superiors and legal counsel within the Department of the Interior, Mr. Cawood issued a permit for the Nazi rally on Tuesday with a number of restrictions designed to minimize the possibility of violence emanating from the Nazi rally.

Over the preceding weekend, reports began appearing in the local press indicating that James Guttmann might not be the person he

represented himself to be. First Frank Collin and then Ed Reynolds indicated that Guttman was not their representative and that they would not be attending the Nazi rally. On Monday, the first reports appeared suggesting the involvement of the JDL or a JDL member in the episode.

On Thursday, February 22nd, the suit of the Jewish New Americans, joined now by two other Jewish organizations as well as the City of Philadelphia was heard in federal district court. It was agreed that, if Guttman did not appear in court by 10 a.m. Friday, the National Park Service would withdraw the permit. When Guttman, quite predictably, did not appear the next morning, the permit was withdrawn. At the same time, plans for a massive counterdemonstration coordinated by the JCRC were also cancelled.

Reaction in the Community

As could be expected, reaction to the news of a Nazi rally in Philadelphia provoked a storm of protests. The JCRC was besieged by phone calls from Jews and non-Jews seeking to confirm the reports and to learn what the community was planning to do. (At the same time, a fellow claiming to be James Guttman made a series of obscene and anti-Semitic calls to JCRC and other Jewish organizations.) Radio talk shows seemed to deal with no other topic for the rest of the week. The mayor of Philadelphia declared that he would provide no police protection to the Nazis if they came to Philadelphia, and the Jewish Defense League vowed to "bust the heads" and "murder" any Nazis who showed up for the Nazi rally.

Various organizations held emergency meetings to discuss counteractions to the Nazi march and to solicit support for a public response from other segments of the community. Much of the non-Jewish community leadership with which JCRC deals regularly came forth to offer whatever support and assistance it could.

The JCRC Response

The JCRC found out about the first

Guttman application Wednesday evening, before any news of it was reported in the media. Our first step was to inform a number of Jewish leaders about the possibility of the Nazi rally so that they would not be caught off guard when the news finally became public. Finally, we sought to verify the information regarding the permit application through contacts with governmental officials in the city.

Over the next 24 hours, following useful discussions within our own community and with the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, the outline of the JCRC's objectives in dealing with the crisis crystallized. They were:

1. to ascertain and keep our community informed as to the verified facts of the planned Nazi rally;
2. to develop and coordinate an effective counterresponse to the Nazi rally if it occurred;
3. to open up channels of communication with representatives of the broader community who were working on this problem (i.e., the National Park Service, the Philadelphia Human Relations Commission, the American Civil Liberties Union, and appropriate municipal authorities);
4. to mobilize the resources of the JCRC Legal Affairs Committee and thereby prevent the recurrence of a Skokie-like situation in which the organized community would become enmeshed in a protracted, and probably futile, legal effort to prevent the Nazi rally*; and,

* It seemed clear to us that the possibility of enjoining a Nazi rally on federal property was even less likely to succeed than an effort, as in Skokie, to deny the Nazis the right to march through a Jewish neighborhood. JCRC felt that recent "free speech" decisions, whether we like it or not, suggested virtually no likelihood of success. Finally, JCRC was determined to undertake no action that might (1) give the Nazis unwarranted publicity and (2) eventuate in their getting oblique support from the newspapers in the form of editorials deploring the efforts of the Jewish community to deny them their first amendment rights.

5. to seek to prevent the Nazis from being granted a permit by legal means that posed no constitutional problems or hazards.

It was apparent to JCRC from the beginning that certain anomalies existed in this so-called Nazi rally. In the first place, the idea of a mid-week, mid-day, mid-winter rally was not usual Nazi practice. There was nothing about the date for the original rally (February 20th or 21st) that had any particular Nazi significance or association and that might, therefore, explain the unusual timing. Even the taunting, obscene phone calls were not characteristic of Nazi behavior after the scheduling of an event. Moreover, holding the rally a scant week after filing for the permit did not allow the normally long leadtime for the Nazis to exploit the publicity potential inherent in their appearance in a community. Finally, it was pointed out that James Guttman was not known to anyone as a Nazi leader in the area. Indeed, his name was not known to the authorities who keep track of area extremists. JCRC also noted that the application was filed in the name of the American Nazi Party which has not existed for about 15 years and is certainly not the name of Frank Collin's party. Only the JDL claimed to know Guttman and insisted that he was in fact a Nazi leader.

Keeping in mind the suspicions we felt, JCRC issued a statement on Thursday, February 15th indicating that we would be closely monitoring the situation even though we had not dismissed the possibility that the whole episode was a hoax.

The following day, JCRC convened a meeting of the executive directors of its constituent organizations. It was agreed that in order to minimize publicity for the Nazis, no public statements would be made until after the National Park Service had ruled on the permit application. Further, the executive felt that some kind of counterdemonstration to the planned Nazi rally was necessary, and there was considerable concern expressed about the high emotions in the community in the face of evidence that we might be dealing with a hoax. JCRC also took steps to convene a special

meeting of its Board of Directors to consider alternative courses of action. The meeting was scheduled to take place the day after the park superintendent was to rule on the permit application.

As mentioned above, the weekend saw a growing number of stories challenging the veracity of the Nazi permit application and even the identity of Guttman himself. JCRC felt that the questionable nature of the application—specifically relating to false information about the auspices of the rally—raised an important procedural question. A letter was drafted calling upon the National Park Service to delay granting the permit pending a clarification of the disputed points in the application.

It is important to note that JCRC only called for a procedural delay in granting the permit. The agency did not raise any challenge to the right of the Nazis to speak, nor did it seek to challenge the permit application on substantive grounds despite evidence that the Nazi rally would be provocative.

In some sense, the request for a delay in granting the permit appears to mitigate against our stated objective of preventing this episode from becoming a protracted litigation with attendant heightened media exposure for the Nazis. The staff was reasonably sure by now that we were dealing with a hoax. Thus, we felt that a procedural delay in granting the permit would either cause James Guttman, the applicant, to fade back into the oblivion he came from or, though less likely, compel him to come forth and identify himself more definitely than he had earlier.

Tuesday morning, Mr. Cawood indicated that he would have to grant the permit though he still had considerable doubt about the veracity of the application and the identity of the applicant. Having granted the permit, federal district judge Clifford S. Green agreed to hear the suit of the Jewish New Americans the following Thursday morning.

At Wednesday's JCRC board meeting, four decisions were reached:

1. Following the advice of its Legal Affairs

Committee, JCRC agreed not to enter any legal challenge to the Nazis' permit application at the present time;

2. JCRC called upon all appropriate governmental officials to provide police protection to every individual who might be in the vicinity of the mall during the Nazi rally;

3. JCRC urged the District Attorney and federal officials to prosecute the Nazis for any crimes that might be committed before, during, and after their rally, including the carrying of signs calling for acts of violence or murder against Jews or any other group; and,

4. JCRC agreed to hold a massive counterdemonstration, under broad, ecumenical co-sponsorship, at Independence Hall in support of cherished American values and to remind the community of the dangers of Nazism. It was agreed to cancel this event if the Nazi rally was not to take place.

The board felt that the decision to decline entering the litigation should not be publicized so as not to appear to be disagreeing with the Association of Jewish New Americans. JCRC would, of course, acknowledge that decision if asked. Furthermore, JCRC determined that it would not ask other communities to join the counterdemonstration but would welcome their participation if they chose to come. A planning committee, comprising agency executives and lay leaders from constituent organizations, was empowered to plan the counterdemonstration.

From the staff's point of view, the most significant board decision was the one to stay out of pending litigation. This decision reduced the possibility of the organized Jewish community appearing to be challenging a constitutional right and, in all probability, spare the community from appearing to have suffered a defeat at the hands of the Nazis in court.*

Support for this position was provided by the JCRC's Committee on Legal Affairs. The

* This perception, though harmful, would have been erroneous. The AJNA's law suit was actually against the U.S. government for granting the permit, not against the Nazis *per se*.

chairman had polled 13 of the 17 members of the committee regarding the legal merits of the case. Those polled had unanimously agreed that virtually no possibility of injunctive relief existed under current Supreme Court interpretations of the law. Though some board members argued strenuously that the court must be challenged in order for the court's view to be changed, the board voted to sustain the judgment of the Legal Affairs Committee.

On the question of the counterdemonstration, the staff found itself in an awkward position. Though having a clear idea as to the nature of any Jewish response to the Nazi rally (i.e., that it should be positive, non-confrontational, ecumenical, pro-American, affective, etc.), the staff did not believe that the Nazis were anything more than a phantom threat to the community. Thus, staff decided to encourage a thorough debate on the question of whether or not the Jewish community should have a counterdemonstration. Though believing that the outcome of such a discussion was foreordained (and surprised at the closeness of the vote!) staff felt that discussion on the matter would be a useful tool in helping the community examine all alternatives to a Nazi threat.

Had the board voted to hold no counterdemonstration, JCRC would have been subjected to severe criticism from within the community for the next two days. However, following the non-appearance of Guttman in court, JCRC's position would have been sustained by events. Realistically, however, the emotional pitch to which the community had been lifted required that planning continue for a counterdemonstration even though it seemed likely that neither rally would ever take place. Preparations for the counterdemonstration cost the community many hundreds of dollars and nearly two man-months of time. Yet no viable alternative currently exists if the JCRC is to demonstrate its own responsiveness to the community whose will it purports to serve.

Following the board meeting, the planning committee was quickly convened. Consider-

able discussion ensued concerning ways to make the Jewish response visually appealing in order to attract at least a "fair share" of media attention. It was agreed to juxtapose muralized Holocaust pictures against the backdrop of Independence Hall as a means of distinguishing American values from Nazi ideology. It was also felt that centering the program around readings from "sacred" documents (Holocaust literature, poetry, exalted statements of American political thought, etc.) would provide a positive emotional overtone to the event. Finally, the committee arranged for a choir and band from an area Catholic school to perform patriotic music.

Turning its attention to soliciting support for the counterdemonstration, the JCRC contacted each of its constituent organizations and urged that they activate phone squads, send action alert postcards, charter buses, and do everything possible to mobilize their members. JCRC itself sent out hundreds of mailgrams following the meeting of its board and thousands of action alert postcards the next day. The Board of Rabbis was encouraged to send mailgrams to each of its members so that pulpit announcements could be made Friday night and Saturday morning. In each communication, however, fully expecting the event to be cancelled, we instructed the community to stay tuned to the media for any changes in plan.

As expected, James Guttman did not appear in federal district court on Friday morning, and pursuant to an agreement that had been reached between the judge and the Independence National Historical Park, the permit for the Nazi rally was withdrawn. For the record, the court made it amply clear that the withdrawal was based on unusual procedural events and *not* because the park service had in any way erred in initially granting the permit. The withdrawal of the permit, along with assurances from the superintendent of the park that sufficient time did not exist for him to grant the Nazis another permit for the coming Sunday, created the

conditions that enabled JCRC, following the mandate of its board, to cancel its own counterdemonstration.

Following a week of tumult, frantic calling, and intense planning, the silence of the JCRC office on Friday afternoon was deafening. No one, though, was happy. The denouement was not satisfying to anyone. Though the Nazis would not be marching, the community had been subjected to considerable uproar and—especially for the survivors—pain. JCRC immediately called for an investigation into possible violations of law that may have occurred during the preceding nine days. However, the U.S. Attorney indicated that, with the withdrawal of the permit, the investigation was now closed.

Factors Impeding the JCRC Strategy

In many ways, JCRC could be pleased with its performance. The agency had stayed on top of the factual situation, had developed good channels of communication with community agencies and leaders involved in these events, consulted the constituent agencies and leaders in decision-making, kept the Jewish community informed, and developed an analysis of the situation that provided to be essentially correct. However, certain factors influenced events in the community in ways that were counter to the objectives set forth by the CRC. The three most noteworthy were the role of the media in reporting the events, the behavior of the survivor community, and an insufficient understanding by some constituent agencies of community relations process.

Of the three, the role of the media was far and away the most damaging. Particularly in the first days of the episode, the media engaged in a pattern of reporting that sensationalized the Nazi permit application to the degree that they seemed to be making news rather than reporting it.

TV news reporters in particular magnified the event out of proportion. This was done largely by focussing on the possible response to a Nazi rally by the Jewish Defense League—a response that, predictably enough,

promised violence and murder if the Nazis appeared. (Surely a safe show of macho given the subsequent allegations about the Nazi permit seeker.) Secondly, many reports speculated on the possibility of Skokie happening in Philadelphia and predicted the appearance of Frank Collin in the community. Thirdly, the media ignored those voices in the community, trained to deal with such groups as the Nazis, who were raising serious questions about the veracity of the Guttman application. On Friday, February 16th, the Philadelphia Human Relations Commission issued a formal statement of its belief that the planned Nazi rally was a hoax. Not a single newspaper, radio station, or TV news program mentioned it. JCRC's own judgment that this might be a hoax was also buried in virtually all newscasts.

Even when the identity of James Guttman became the source of reports that the JDL might be involved in the Nazi rally request, the media continued reporting events at a level of intensity that generated emotion, not understanding. Where there was a need to be "cool," the media were "hot." And all of this took place without a single face-to-face interview between James Guttman and any reporter for any newspaper, radio, or TV station. No Philadelphia journalist ever set eyes on James Guttman! And yet reports and speculations about the individual, his connections, his intentions, and ultimately his identity filled the airwaves and newspaper columns for over a week. Only the Philadelphia *Inquirer* recognized that the bizarre background of these events required of the media restraint in reporting the news.

Philadelphia has a large and highly-organized survivor community. JCRC works closely with it in promoting understanding of the lessons of the Holocaust in the broader community. Philadelphia was the first community to have a memorial to the 6,000,000 Jewish martyrs on public property, the first large city to introduce a Holocaust curriculum into the schools, and it has become a widely-heralded center for Holocaust studies

through, among other things, Temple University's National Institute on the Holocaust and last fall's First International Conference on the Lessons of the Holocaust.

For survivors, the possibility of a Nazi event in the community elicits an anguish and pain whose intensity can only be surmised by those of us who have not lived through the dark night of the Third Reich. Since the Holocaust survivors are well-organized, it is not surprising that they should undertake actions which, in their minds, would either prevent or forestall the Nazi rally from happening. To them, it is a sacred duty to oppose Nazism by any means available. They owe this, they believe, to the memory of parents, brothers, sisters, and loved ones lost in the extermination camps of Europe.

Like many other Jews, survivors tend to feel that, at bottom, only Jews will help other Jews. And, to them, the presence of Nazis in the community represents the "bottom," the singular, crucial threat to the Jews. Thus, the survivors' decision to swiftly seek an injunction against the Nazi march was undertaken with conscious disregard for how this act might appear to the broader community. The niceties of community relations concerns, or community relations process, or even the prospects of ultimate defeat were simply not compelling enough to deter the survivors from entering litigation. Indeed, the representatives of the Association for Jewish New Americans continually sounded the same theme: it doesn't matter if we lose in court, so long as we show that Jews are prepared to stand up to the Nazis.

In addition to entering litigation without thorough consultation with the JCRC, the AJNA was also unhappy with the counterdemonstration planned through us. It felt that the role of the survivors was not highlighted sufficiently (they were to have one principal on the program) and were agitated that certain ethnic groups were being asked to cosponsor the counterdemonstration and would, too, have a role in the program. Though sensitive to the survivors' belief that many Poles and

Ukrainians were implicated in the genocide directed against the Jews, the planning committee felt that a pro-American counterdemonstration should underscore the value of cultural pluralism in our society. It rejected the notion that the criminal behavior of some individuals can be used as a basis to stigmatize entire groups. However, seeking to respond to the survivors' needs, the planning committee invited a Greek-American law school dean to represent the ethnic communities and arranged to have him, as his part in the program, recite Emma Lazarus's poem that adorns the Statue of Liberty.

There is, though, a fundamental difference in the way the survivors viewed these events. In essence, they tended to see the proposed Nazi rally as merely a problem for the Jewish community. The response, they felt, had to be directed and swift regardless of the implications within the broader community. The public response, the Association felt, had to have the character of a memorial rather than being organized as a reaffirmation of democratic values and the unity of the total community in support of these cherished principles.

Of greater concern to the JCRC was the discovery that some of our constituent organizations have not yet fully embraced the concept of community consultation. Without prior consultation with the JCRC, and without awaiting the policy determination of the CRC, two large membership organizations undertook certain actions which, in the end, undermined their own ability to function effectively within the framework of action outlined by the JCRC.

One, for example, early on began planning a counterprotest of its own that involved, among other things, bringing in people from communities and chapters outside Philadelphia to physically confront the Nazis (or get as close to them as the park service authorities would allow). The other, it seems, was also part of that effort. Neither consulted with the JCRC prior to initiating action along these lines.

Yet when the JCRC Board of Directors

acted to endorse the idea of a counterdemonstration, the role that these organizations would be able to play in the community's official response became cloudy insofar as they had anticipated the community and embarked on their own programs. Thus, these organizations found themselves rendered largely ineffectual, since they themselves were not sure whether they were part of the community's response (which JCRC felt would be desirable) or operating on their own and outside of the discipline of the community.

What was underscored by this problem is the need for JCRC constituent organizations to accept the discipline of the community consultation process not as a "brake" on their enthusiasm for action but rather as a tool to ensure that their input into the JCRC's planning process can be maximized. In light of these events JCRC has initiated a program to heighten the awareness of its constituents as to the reasons why a coordinated approach is the most effective way to do community relations.

Conclusions

Philadelphia's confrontation with a threatened Nazi rally was, in general, a successful one from a community relations perspective. Notwithstanding the problems with the media and the minimal breakdown of the community consultation process, it is clear the JCRC demonstrated an ability to gather and disseminate accurate information, establish good channels of communication both within the Jewish and total communities, and work with our constituents in determining clear objectives and effecting programs to achieve them.*

Perhaps even more importantly, the community was able to develop workable consenses in the face of strongly-held, frequently contradictory positions. The votes within

* There is some concern expressed within JCRC that our friends in the black community were not as responsive to our call for unity as we would have wished. While speculation concerning the reasons for this vary, it is clear that greater communications between our two communities is necessary in order to understand better what are obviously different perspectives on the Nazi threat.

JCRC on whether or not to enter litigation and whether or not to demonstrate at all were surprisingly close (26-18 in the former case, 23-19 in the latter). Yet the involvement of the community in the decision-making process allowed everyone to work together, for in the deliberative process we discovered that every-

one's goals were the same though their approaches differed. Given the heat of the passions unleashed by a Nazi presence in the late 1970's, the Philadelphia Jewish community learned that it is resourceful enough to channel deeply-felt emotion into legitimate and effective community relations responses.