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THE SURVIVOR — Leopold Engleitner, 103, the oldest male concentration camp survivor, told his story at Harvard University in Cambridge yesterday. With Engleitner were Bernhard Rammerstorfer (right), author of a book about him called “Unbroken Will,” and graduate student Johann Boedecker. Nazis arrested Engleitner for being a Jehovah’s Witness, Story, **B4**.

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Holocaust survivor, 103, tells students of resisting Nazis

He describes time in concentration camps in WWII

By Milton J. Valencia
GLOBE STAFF

CAMBRIDGE — He would not bend to their political will or join their army, nor would he deny his religion, and for that Leopold Engleitner was sent to a concentration camp in wartime Germany.

“Every morning . . . you would not know whether you would live to see the evening,” the Austrian native said through a translator, his broken voice showing his years.

But again he saw each evening throughout World War II. And some 70 years later, at age 103, Engleitner told his story of six years in three concentration camps under Nazi rule, never losing faith.

Beginning the latest US tour of his book, “Unbroken Will,” Engleitner, sitting hunched over in a wheelchair, draped in a bag-

gy coat and pink tie, told a crowd of about 400 Harvard University students, faculty, and others at a Center for European Studies seminar last night that no hardship could break his will.

Believed to be the oldest-known male survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, he told of the beatings he took whenever he showed weakness, and the suffering of others that he saw, particularly Jews, when Adolf Hitler starved his “slaves.”

But his story is of a nonviolent resistance.

He was arrested for being a Jehovah’s Witness, called a Bible researcher at the time.

He was also persecuted for refusing to join the military, saying it was against God’s will and that he would have no part of a nationalism of hate.

At the end of his incarceration, he was sent to forced labor and fled, the end of the Second World War coming before his apprehension.

Decades later, he met Bernhard Rammerstorfer, who would become his biographer

and his friend, as the two traveled the world in Engleitner’s elder days to tell his story.

“This was an extraordinary opportunity for both students and ordinary adults to hear the story of someone who witnessed the history of the entire 20th century, including some of its most brutal and arduous times,” said Alice Gissinger, a Harvard sophomore and cochairwoman of the Center for European Studies Undergraduate Board.

To Johann Boedecker, a graduate student from Germany, the event provided for a discussion on neutral territory of the suffering so many faced during the Holocaust.

“It can inspire politicians to prevent even the slightest tendencies” toward racism and such hatred, he said.

Boedecker also pointed out that Jehovah’s Witnesses are not widely considered victims of the Holocaust in Germany and that Engleitner’s talk was a good chance to hear of the horrors from a survivor.

For Engleitner, who saw the



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“Unbroken Will” chronicles the story of Leopold Engleitner, who spent six years in concentration camps.

atrocities of World War I as a child and survived the Spanish flu as a teenager, the hardships began in 1939. Meeting with friends in a Bible study group, he met the prosecution of Nazi sol-

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LEOPOLD ENGLEITNER
Holocaust survivor,
through a translator

diers.

Presented with the chance for freedom, he refused the condition that he sign a waiver denouncing his religion.

He would support projects for the public good, but would not join the army or support the cause. “I would speak in such a way that I would be recognized as one of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” he said, according to a reading of his book last night.

Even when a Nazi soldier told him that he must sign a waiver denying his religion or leave through the chimney, he

declared: “I will not sign, nor will I leave through the chimney. I will go home.”

Years later, he did. And decades later, not even his neighbors would believe his story, refusing in part to believe the Holocaust ever occurred.

“Although the Nazis did everything short of taking his life, they could not take his faith,” said Rammerstorfer, who unearthed historic court documents and corroborated Engleitner’s account with fellow prisoners to tell his story.

Last night’s seminar began with an account by Robert Buckley, a consultant with the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., who said hundreds of stories were researched to portray an accurate account of the Holocaust.

“To one person in this audience, the memories are as fresh as if they occurred yesterday,” Buckley said, “and his memories and his story need to be shared.”

Milton Valencia can be reached at mvalencia@globe.com.