

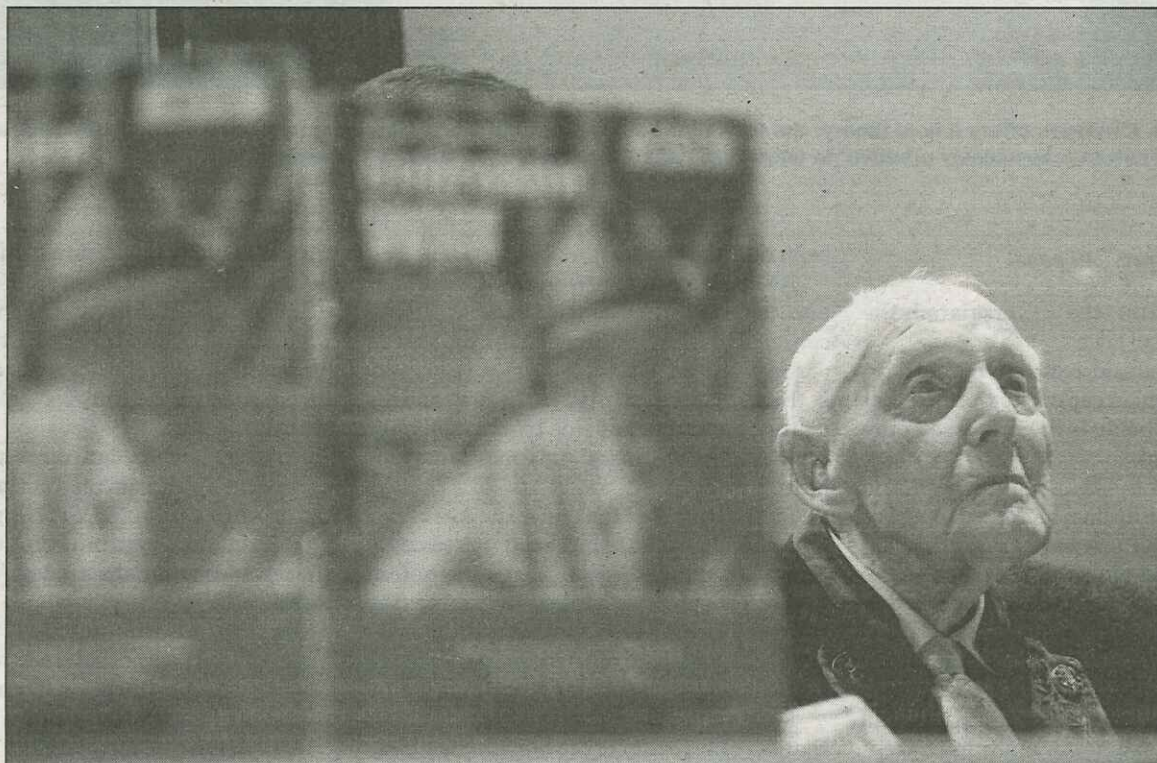
**Inside
& ONLINE**

Bearing witness
At the Science Center, a Jehovah's Witness, the oldest survivor of the Holocaust, speaks.
Page 13

May 7-13, 2009 Harvard University Gazette/13

Tale of terror and courage

Holocaust survivor, Jehovah's Witness speaks at Harvard, offers a message of hope



Photos Jon Chase/Harvard News Office

Interned in three concentration camps during the Second World War for refusing to renounce his faith as a Jehovah's Witness, pledge his allegiance to Adolf Hitler, or join the German army, Leopold Engleitner, who told his story at the Science Center, survived torture and incarceration by the Nazis from 1939 to 1943.

By Colleen Walsh
Harvard News Office

Aided by a wheel chair, his slight frame bent in part by a curvature of the spine since birth, in part by the passage of time, a man who endured unspeakable cruelty 70 years ago told his story of survival to a Harvard audience.

Austrian Leopold Engleitner, purportedly the world's oldest concentration camp survivor, spoke at the Science Center May 4 **history** to a diverse crowd: young and old, men, women, and children.

Interned in three concentration camps during the Second World War for refusing to renounce his faith as a Jehovah's Witness, pledge his allegiance to Adolf Hitler, or join the German army, Engleitner survived torture and incarceration by the Nazis from 1939 to 1943.

Approximately 10,000 Jehovah's Witnesses were sent to concentration camps during Hitler's ascendancy. It is estimated that between 2,500 and 5,000 perished. Unlike the millions of persecuted Jews who were imprisoned and died at the hands of the Nazis with no chance of escape, Jehovah's Witnesses were offered their freedom in return for signing a declaration stating



Robert Buckley from the Holocaust Memorial Museum holds up a replica concentration camp jacket.

they renounced their religion and fully supported the German regime. Engleitner repeatedly refused to sign the document.

A chance encounter with Engleitner in 1994 by filmmaker Bernhard Rammerstorfer led to a book and a DVD about the former's life as well as a lasting friendship. Introducing the diminutive and spirited 103-year-old, the biographer described their first meeting, noting that Engleitner "talked and talked and talked."

Amazingly, in the years following the war, his Upper Austrian neighbors turned

on him, branding him a coward. Some even claimed the concentration camps never existed, said Rammerstorfer, who realized "it did [Engleitner] good to have someone at long last to finally listen to him."

In addition, the chance to be able to tell Engleitner's story, Rammerstorfer said, "could provide valuable lessons for the peaceful coexistence of mankind."

Though his voice was shaky and frail, the elderly Austrian's determination was visibly resolute. He responded to questions in German, tapping his hand firmly on the table in front of him with each answer to emphasize his points.

With the aid of an interpreter, Engleitner recounted some of his harrowing moments while imprisoned at the concentration camps Buchenwald, Niederhagen, and Ravensbrück.

"Every morning when you woke up, you would not know whether you would live to see the evening," he said, describing how he narrowly escaped being put to death by forc-

(See **Holocaust**, next page)

Holocaust

(Continued from previous page)

ing himself back to work after collapsing from hunger. Later, on a march from one of the camps, he was kicked so fiercely by a guard he was left sterile.

When told by a Nazi officer he must either sign a declaration renouncing his faith or he would “leave through the chimney,” Engleitner said he replied, “I will neither sign, nor will I leave through the chimney. I will go home.”

He was so certain that we would make it home, he bought a suitcase at the Niederhagen concentration camp, one that once belonged to a deceased prisoner, as a symbol of hope. The very same black, weathered suitcase was perched behind him against the hall’s blackboard as he spoke.

In 1943, Engleitner was finally released from Ravensbrück concentration camp, under the condition that he submit to forced labor. He weighed only 62

pounds. But his suffering wasn’t over. Close to the end of the war, the Nazis ordered him again to join the Germany army. Instead of complying, Engleitner fled to the mountains, where he hid for several weeks, continually hunted by Nazi officers, until the war finally came to an end.

Engleitner’s visit to campus was sponsored by Harvard’s Center for European Studies (CES) and the CES Undergraduate Board. The event was the beginning of a nationwide tour to promote the most recent version of the book “Unbroken Will: The Extraordinary Courage of an Ordinary Man.” The tour is the third in the United States for Engleitner and Rammerstorfer. Throughout the past 10 years, the pair has traveled close to 60,000 miles in Europe and the United States, speaking at schools, universities, and Holocaust memorial sites.

In response to the question, “How did

you manage to get this old?” Engleitner replied, “I am a happy boy, I find joy in everything, [and] I don’t really have time to die,” adding, “I’ll be back.”

Rammerstorfer called his friend “the most contented man he had ever met,” and said that even at his age, he is “still determined to teach us the lessons of peace and tolerance.”

For Barbara Deforge, who traveled from Marion, Mass., to hear Engleitner speak, the trip was well worth it.

“When you see a person who has actually been [through the Holocaust] it makes it more real. ... I am glad I came. It was really very encouraging,” she said of Engleitner’s message and unbroken spirit, “and very hopeful.”

Before his Science Center talk, Leopold Engleitner waits to be introduced.

Jon Chase/Harvard News Office

