

World's oldest Shoah survivor speaks in Hub

103-year-old Jehovah's Witness offers views on Holocaust

By Cara Hogan
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At 103 years old, Leopold Engleitner is the oldest known male survivor of Nazi concentration camps. Like millions of Jews, he was tortured and sent to work camps by the Nazis for his beliefs. But he is not Jewish. He is a Jehovah's Witness, and his unique story has taken years to come to light.

Engleitner spoke to a packed auditorium of more than 400 people at Harvard University this past week, talking about his experience of the Holocaust as a persecuted minority group, a pacifist and a Christian. But his tale is firmly intertwined with the Jewish experience.

Bernhard Rammerstorfer, Engleitner's biographer, acted as inter-



Leopold Engleitner in 1939, left, and today.

preter for Engleitner, who does not speak English.

"He had many chances to sign a declaration renouncing his beliefs and could go out as a free man from the camps, but he refused," said Rammerstorfer. "The Nazis tried to force him; they said 'You have only two possibilities to go home: either

you sign or you go up the chimneys.' He said, 'No, I will go home.'"

Engleitner, an Austrian native, was first imprisoned by the Nazis in 1939 for his refusal to serve in the military. Professor Steven Katz, director of the Elie Wiesel Center for Judaic Studies at Boston University, said the beliefs of the Jehovah's Witnesses made them an easy target of Nazi persecution.

"They were pacifists," said Katz. "They could not participate in the war and would not take oaths to be loyal to the German state. They refused to serve in the army, and as a result, a number of them were imprisoned and suffered quite seriously."

Katz said the group courageously

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Engleitner 'could have gotten out' of the camps

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stood up for their beliefs and should be remembered.

"They were not targeted for annihilation like Jews, but they were punished," said Katz. "Compared to the Jewish tragedy, only a small number died, but they shouldn't be excluded. They should be remembered in the whole story of Nazi persecutions."

Between 1,800 and 2,000 Jehovah's Witnesses died in concentration camps, alongside other minorities such as gypsies and homosexuals.

"It's nothing against the six million Jews [who died], but every one life is too much," said Rammerstorfer.

Engleitner spent six years in concentration camps, including Ravensbruck, Buchenwald and Niedergagen. His experiences there, according to Rammerstorfer, were similar to that of Jewish prisoners, but with one key difference.

"He could have gotten out," said Rammerstorfer. "This choice was never given to Jewish prisoners. He was separated from them in the camp, but saw when Jewish prisoners were

badly treated and he felt great pity."

Engleitner remembers that food was withheld as a punishment for all the prisoners; the Christians went without any food for three days, but the Jews went without for six days. After three days, when he and the other Witnesses received food again, he said, they managed to share what little they had with the Jewish prisoners, amounting to one or two spoonfuls of soup for everyone.

When Rammerstorfer met Engleitner, he was determined to share his life history with the world, writing his biography, "Unbroken Will," and filming a documentary. In his research, he uncovered lost court documents that have corroborated Engleitner's story.

"After the war, it was not an easy time in Austria," said Rammerstorfer. "He was treated like a criminal and a coward because he did not defend his fatherland. It took a long time to have the possibility to speak about his experiences."

And the fact that Engleitner is a Jehovah's Witness affected his ability to share his story.

"No one really was interested in his story be-

cause he was not Jewish," said Rammerstorfer. "Maybe if he were Jewish, he would have had the Jewish community behind him and it would be easier to be recognized as a victim."

Still, Engleitner and his fellow Jewish prisoners had more than suffering in common. Like many of the Jews fortunate enough to survive, Engleitner's religious devotion sustained him.

"He says without the help of God, he would not have been able to make it through," said Rammerstorfer. "His faith was strong before he came to the camp, but it was tested and increased. He was convinced that the Nazi regime would not last."

Rammerstorfer said he has persevered and lived to share his story with people all over the world.

"Now at 103, he still lives and still tells his story," said Rammerstorfer. "It's now exactly 70 years later. All his perpetrators and torturers who intended to kill him or break his will have passed away, but he still lives and tells his story of peace and tolerance."