



Chuck Kirman / Star staff

Bernhard Rammerstorfer holds the microphone for Leopold Engleitner, 103, the oldest male Holocaust survivor, who spoke Friday at Moorpark College about his imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps more than 70 years ago. Rammerstorfer made a documentary film and wrote a biography of Engleitner, both titled "Unbroken Will."

Holocaust survivor, 103, tells his tale

Visit caps area college's Year of Democracy

By Michele Willer-Allred
Correspondent

After being brutalized as a Nazi prisoner, Leopold Engleitner was given many opportunities to leave the concentration camp where he was being held — if he would just renounce his faith as a Jehovah's Witness.

Engleitner, then 33 years old, was told to either sign a declaration saying he was no longer a Jehovah's Witness or expect to leave the camp "through the chimney," as one captor warned him.

Many Nazi concentration camp prisoners were killed, their bodies burned in ovens at the base of chimneys that towered over the camp where Engleitner stayed.

"I will not sign or leave through a chimney," Engleitner told the Nazis. His wish was to go home but only on his terms.

Sticking to what his admirers call his "unbroken will," Engleitner chose his faith over his freedom.

For that, and his refusal to serve in the German military, he was sent to two more concentration camps in six years. He left weighing a mere 62 pounds.

Seventy years later, Engleitner, who at age 103 is the oldest known male survivor of the Holocaust, was greeted on Friday with a standing ovation by hundreds of guests during his

sold-out appearance at Moorpark College. His appearance was the final event of Moorpark College's Year of Democracy program and was shown throughout the world via web-cast.

Two other perspectives

Also speaking Friday were Renee Firestone, an Auschwitz concentration camp survivor, and Robert Buckley, a consultant with the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

As his striped concentration camp uniform was displayed nearby, the soft-spoken Engleitner, dressed in a black coat and pink tie, sat in his wheelchair onstage.

On one side was his friend and biographer, Bernhard Rammerstorfer, who chronicled Engleitner's story in the book and prize-winning documentary film "Unbroken Will." On the other was his interpreter, Robert Wagemann, a disabled German who avoided being killed under the Nazi's Action T4, or euthanasia program.

Rammerstorfer said he met Engleitner by chance 15 years ago when he approached the old man sitting alone on a park bench in Austria.

Engleitner recalled how he was living in the Austrian impe-

rial city of Bad Ischl and was persecuted as a Jehovah's Witness by the Nazis. In 1939, he was arrested by the Gestapo. He was imprisoned in the concentration camps Buchenwald, Niederhagen and Ravensbrück.

Engleitner talked on Friday about how instead of leaving the camp, he shared the little food he had with Jews at the camps, suffered brutal beatings from guards, and how, after collapsing and being taken to a sick bay, he gathered the strength to flee after learning he was about to be given a lethal chemical injection.

"Every morning, you would not know whether you would be alive in the evening. It was so dreadful that the hair of young prisoners, age 15 and 16, turned gray in a matter of weeks," said Engleitner.

He eventually left the concentration camp in July 1943 by agreeing to be a lifelong slave laborer on a farm. He escaped the farm, and fled from the Nazis in caves and mountains until the war ended on April 17, 1945.

Professors bring lesson

Engleitner's "unbroken will" impressed Dan Brown, a Holocaust historian, who along with filmmaker Ferenc Gutai, both

professors at Moorpark College, arranged Engleitner's visit to the college.

"Leopold's willingness to stand up for his righteous convictions in the face of tyranny shows us that we cannot ever surrender our beliefs to the dark side," said Brown.

Rammerstorfer said Engleitner, who will turn 104 in July, can still recall exact details about his experiences and has remained upbeat, never showing anger or hatred to those who tormented him. Rammerstorfer said it is ironic that Engleitner has outsurvived his Nazi captors who promised him death 70 years ago.

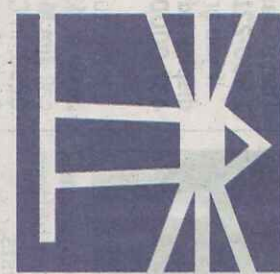
"I'm a happy boy. I enjoy everything and I have no time to die," Engleitner said on Friday with a grin.

While sitting backstage, Engleitner said he still has more work to do with his life.

"I want to encourage young people to stand up for justice and peace and listen to their conscience. I want to serve as an example that even at a high age, you can have goals and reach them," he said.

Engleitner also will appear at 10:30 a.m. Tuesday at the Ronald Reagan Library and Museum in Simi Valley for a book signing, which will be open to the public.

Partly sunny
High of 76 Inland,
72 at the coast. C12
May 24,
2009 EC



VENTURA COUNTY

STAR

WWW.VENTURACOUNTYSTAR.COM

SUNDAY