

107-year-old Holocaust survivor, Jehovah's Witness is star of 'Ladder in the Lions' Den' documentary

By Bob Strauss, Staff Writer

Posted: 11/13/2012 08:03:20 AM PST

Updated: 11/13/2012 05:44:13 PM PST



107-year-old Holocaust survivor and Jehovah's Witness Leopold Engleitner looks on following a screening of a new documentary, "Ladder in the Lion's Den," in Encino, Calif., on Monday, Nov. 12, 2012. The film depicts Engleitner's life as a Jehovah's Witness in Nazi concentration camps. Engleitner is the world's oldest known male Nazi concentration camp survivor. (Andy Holzman/Staff Photographer)

An unusual Holocaust documentary has brought near-capacity afternoon crowds to the Laemmle Town Center 5 for almost a week.

They've come not only to see "Ladder in the Lions' Den," but to meet its subject, 107-year-old Austrian survivor Leopold Engleitner. | PHOTOS

Sitting quietly in his wheelchair outside the theater, the frail but remarkably resilient Engleitner met adoring fans from all over Southern California after Monday's screening of the 40-minute film. It recounts the Jehovah's Witness' refusal to join Hitler's army during World War II and subsequent imprisonment in three Nazi concentration camps.

"It's really something that everybody should know about but very few people do," said Dave Butler, a Jehovah's Witness who drove down from Bakersfield to see the movie and meet the man. "Leopold doesn't speak English, I'd love to talk to him, but I think he's awesome. He's expending his limited strength and resources to come out and meet people and do this tour; it's amazing. It's very generous of him."

Born in 1905 with a bent spine and raised in a lakeside village not far from where Hitler grew up, Engleitner was appalled by the slaughter of World War I and joined the pacifist Jehovah's Witnesses in the early 1930s. When Austria joined the German Reich in 1938, members of the religion were rounded

up. They could get out of the camps if they signed a paper - the ladder of the title - renouncing their religion and accepting the Nazis' warlike ways.

According to the film, the Austrian Witnesses, including Engleitner, refused to do so. Many, of course, paid with their lives.

Through narration and re-enactment, the movie recounts Engleitner's harrowing ordeal, which included the time when, starving on a march back to camp from a work detail, his testicle was crushed by an SS guard's boot, which prevented him from ever fathering children.

Decades later, Engleitner met a young Austrian, Bernhard Rammerstorfer, in a park in his hometown. Taken by the older man's story, Rammerstorfer wrote a book about Engleitner, "Unbroken Will," and produced an earlier documentary about him as well as "Ladder in the Lions' Den."

— Independent up to age 105, Engleitner has lived with Rammerstorfer, his wife and their young daughter in their

home country for the last two years.

"He deserves it," Rammerstorfer said. "His last period of life should not be in a nursing home, but in a family. So it was important to give him a warm family environment, and he enjoys it very much."

Obviously, though, the old guy still gets around. Indeed, Engleitner's racked up 95,000 travel miles in less than two decades, making appearances and speaking to audiences throughout the world.

"I like it very much," Engleitner said, with Rammerstorfer interpreting. "Now I've found open ears and can tell my story through the film. One of the most important things to me is to teach people tolerance, humanity and peace.

"I especially appreciate that the youth are so interested and open," Engleitner continued. "I like to speak to youth because they are not prejudiced and they are open to everyone."

Andrew Sanchez, 22, is an example of that. He came up from San Diego with several fellow Jehovah's Witnesses to see the film Monday.

"We heard about this movie talking about his faith in action," Sanchez said. "It changes your perspective when you meet someone in person who you talk about in school and read about in history books.

"It drives it home for you, makes you feel a little more a part of it."

"I hope that educators will pick it up and realize the important message that is there," the film's narrator, Sun Valley resident Fred Fuss, said. "Leopold did a very significant thing: he just said no. When he was being bullied, browbeaten, threatened with his life to give up his principles, he didn't, because of his conscience. Isn't that the message we try to give our young people?"

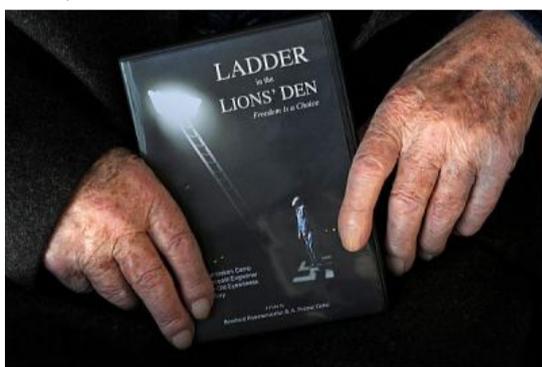
While not suggesting that it was in any way easy, Engleitner said that his stubbornness in the face of evil was, quite simply, inevitable.

"It's important that you live your life according to just principles," Engleitner explained. "I found them in the Bible, and that's what also gave me strength - my strong belief in God."

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Myra Becker meets 107-year-old Holocaust survivor Leopold Engleitner after a screening of a new documentary "Ladder in the Lion's Den" in Encino on Monday, Nov. 12, 2012. (Andy Holzman/Staff Photographer)