

books

Books News

The story of the oldest living Holocaust survivor**Oldest Holocaust survivor tells a story of faith and courage that's out of the ordinary**

Leopold Engleitner endured the Holocaust. His long life since has inspired others.

By November 30, 2008 edition

By Isabelle de Pommereau

Correspondent

Frankfurt

Leopold Engleitner's blue eyes still burn bright. Last month, the 103-year-old traveled to Frankfurt, from his home in Austria to tell his story at the world's largest publishing event. Mr. Engleitner, a former farmer from the Salzburg region, is a Jehovah's Witness.

And he is the oldest living survivor of the Holocaust.

At first no one seemed interested in the facts of his life, which included an unwavering faith and enduring internments in the Buchenwald, Wewelsburg, and Ravensbrueck camps run by German Nazis. Then a young Austrian filmmaker met Engleitner by chance and ended up listening to his stories for hours on end.

The filmmaker, Bernhard Rammerstorfer, was captivated by what he heard and eventually dropped everything he was doing to write Engleitner's biography.

"What impressed me was that a simple farmer had the courage to withstand Hitler, to refuse to go to war although millions of people did go to war, that he had the strength to adhere to his own conscience," says Mr. Rammerstorfer.

He first published "Unbroken Will: The Extraordinary Courage of an Ordinary Man," in German in 1999. It was republished this year, and an English edition is scheduled to be released in 2009.

Walter Manoschek, a political scientist at the University of Vienna who has worked on a project sponsored by the Austrian government to rehabilitate Austrian victims of the Nazi regime, says that Engleitner's story brings to life one of the least-known groups of Nazi victims that also included Gypsies, homosexuals, political prisoners, and the mentally and physically disabled.

A 'systematic resistance'

Nazis targeted Jehovah's Witnesses mainly because as religious conscientious objectors they eschew swearing an oath to any earthly authority and refused to serve in the German Army. Refusal to serve under Hitler was regarded as treason, punishable by death. Among the 3,200 Witnesses interned in concentration camps, thousands were killed, according to historians. Unlike other groups – most notably, of course, millions of Jews – they could have walked out free had they agreed to renounce their faith.

"The Jehovah's Witnesses' systematic resistance as a collective group is something very unique," says Professor Manoschek. "Most people [laugh] at the old-fashioned way in which

they try to bring religion to people's houses. But it's important for people to know what happened to them during the Nazi time."

Engleitner's principles set him apart from others beginning early in his life.

As the son of a sawmill worker growing up in Bad Ischl, the "emperor's village," in the early 1900s, he and his schoolmates would often encounter Franz Joseph, the emperor, who vacationed there. The gap between the royal wealth and his own family's poverty angered the young Engleitner.

After the effects of World War I had decimated his village he vowed never to fight in a war. To overcome hunger, he left school at 13, built a small house for himself, and eked out a living crafting skis, among other things. Later, his mistrust of established authority led him to abandon Catholicism and join the Jehovah's Witnesses.

"People spat at me," Engleitner says of the reaction to his adopted faith.

Soon after Germany annexed Austria in April 1938, the Gestapo tracked Engleitner down at a secret Bible-reading meeting. The SS men brandished a piece of paper in his face. It was a declaration that he agreed to renounce his faith and was willing to enlist in Hitler's Army. Along with the document came a verbal threat.

"'If you sign this paper, you can go home,' " Engleitner recounts. "'If not, you're under arrest, and you know what will happen to you.' "

Engleitner refused to sign.

"I wouldn't take the easy way out," Engleitner told the audience at the Frankfurt Book Fair in October. His faith, he said, is what helped him not yield to pressure – and what kept him alive. His sense of humor was also on display in Frankfurt when he recounted his dealings with Gestapo officials at the Buchenwald camp.

"'Engleitner, Engleitner! I'm warning you for the last time!' " he said, mimicking the SS official. "'If you continue to object to military service, then you already have both feet in the grave.' " Engleitner's reply elicited laughter from a rapt audience. "If I've already got both feet in the grave just standing here," he said, "what on earth will it be like on the front line? Or do they shoot with candy out there?"

The "Little Austrian," as the Nazis called him, did walk out of the camps four years later – but for a different reason: The Nazis had come to value the Jehovah's Witnesses' work ethics.

"If appropriate tasks are chosen, no supervision will be necessary, since they will not try to run away," Heinrich Himmler wrote in 1943 about the Jehovah's Witnesses, according to official documents cited in Engleitner's biography. "They can be left to work on their own and will prove themselves the most efficient administrators and workers."

A 65-lb. Engleitner was set free in exchange for promising to work in agriculture only. It wasn't until the American forces intervened that Engleitner was able to get another job, in the roads department of St. Wolfgang, near Salzburg, where he continued working until he retired in 1969.

Life after the war wasn't easy. "We [Jehovah's Witnesses] were always treated as second-class citizens and lumped together with the work-shy and criminal elements," Engleitner says.

His parents, he says, never accepted his religion. Few seemed to care about his triumph.

"He tried to talk about his story, but no one listened," says Rammerstorfer.

Rammerstorfer, too, had hurdles to overcome in retelling Engleitner's story. When no publisher came forward, he published the book with his own money.

"In the face of our historical responsibility, I am sparing no effort to document the crimes of the Nazi regime," he says.

But his real motive in writing the book was to share Engleitner's ideals of tolerance, humanity, and respect for others.

That message wasn't lost at the book fair in Frankfurt. "It's a great lesson to feel it's possible for a human being to be free inside when you're oppressed," says Svetlana Protsenko of Moscow, who had left her own stand at the fair to hear Engleitner talk.

"For people who have suffered from totalitarian regimes," she says, "it's important to ... keep your beliefs, ideas, and moral standards."

A transformative response

Today Engleitner experiences a new kind of response to his unwavering faith.

In St. Wolfgang, he became a bit of a local celebrity. The Austrian government, too, took notice, inviting him to tour schools and universities to share his story and talk about nonviolent resistance to oppression.

At 97, he undertook the 500-mile journey to speak to an audience in Wewelsburg, where he had been interned more than 50 years before.

And two years ago, Rammerstorfer and Engleitner toured the United States, drawing crowds at Columbia University in New York and at the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, among other places.

Although Engleitner says he is not bitter about all that he has endured, the honors he has received over the past few years have restored his faith in people.

"They transformed me from a persecuted, despised, concentration-camp internee and a cowardly conscientious objector to a completely rehabilitated man who is even regarded as an example to others," he says.

"In the past, this would have been unthinkable," Engleitner adds. "That people's attitudes should change so dramatically is something I would never have believed possible."

Comments

1. **Freddy Lejeune** | 11.30.08

He is a survivor of concentration camps, but not of the Holocaust. The Holocaust is the term generally in use to describe the extermination of Jews because they were Jews. No Jehovah Witness, to the best of my knowledge, was ever targeted for the gas chamber. The use of the term "Holocaust" is incorrect and your reporter ought to be educated on that. Obviously she is not knowledgeable on the subject.

2. **Ron C.** | 12.01.08

Jehovah's Witnesses although small in number were specifically targeted by Hitler as "enemies of the state" and also victims of the Jewish Holocaust as shown in the following link:

http://isurvived.org/AUSCHWITZ_TheCamp.html. Those who did not survive the concentration camps were killed by various methods.

3. **mike d** | 12.01.08

Hitler himself said in his own words that he would exterminate the Witnesses. They were hunted specifically by the Gestapo and put in the same concentration camps as everyone else.

Witnesses do not minimize the suffering of other groups in the Holocaust with semantics like you are trying to do. Obviously you are not knowledgeable on the subject and you should educate yourself, Freddy.

4. **Sarah** | 12.01.08

By definition... Holocaust or Shoah, the systematic killing of six million Jews, but also of Gypsies, Slavs, homosexuals and other "undesirable" groups in Europe during World War II. Jehovah's Witnesses were murdered along side those of the Jewish faith. It is estimated that 6000 witnesses died during the Holocaust (in and outside the gas chamber). The number is small in comparison to the Jews...but is that really the point?

The fact is that the reporter is correct.

<http://www.ushmm.org/education/resource/jehovahs/jehovahsw.php>

5. **Russ Freestone** | 12.01.08

Interestingly, the United States Memorial Holocaust Museum gives prominent attention to the suffering Jehovah's Witnesses endured during the Nazi era. Note the article about the Witnesses on their website.

6. kevin smullen | 12.01.08

hol·o·caust Spelled Pronunciation [hol-uh-kawst, hoh-luh-] Show IPA Pronunciation
–noun

1. a great or complete devastation or destruction, esp. by fire.
2. a sacrifice completely consumed by fire; burnt offering.
3. (usually initial capital letter) the systematic mass slaughter of European Jews in Nazi concentration camps during World War II (usually prec. by the).
4. any mass slaughter or reckless destruction of life.

{look at 4} so you see many didnt lose there lives but they lost the lifes they had everyone in that area at that time was effected by that abomination of that man Hitler in some destructive way.

7. Frederic Fuss | 12.01.08

The biography of Leopold Engleitner is a significant addition to the account of the Holocaust. Had there been more people with his courage and principles, there would have been no Holocaust.

He openly refused to accept the doctrines of Nazism, would not conform to its codes of conduct and did not even adopt its language. His presence in the forum of the discussions on the causes of and lessons learned from the Holocaust is huge and ought not to be diminished by quibbling over semantics.

I encourage all to read the book; then comment.

8. C. Seiber | 12.01.08

Look up Purple triangle. That is what JW's wore in concentration camps.

9. k | 12.01.08

some of the Jehvoah's Witnesses were from Jewish families. Despite the nationality or origination of the sufferer - the suffering for all was greatly unecessary and undeniably cruel.

10. [Jon Boyes](#) | 12.01.08

I look forward to reading the book when it comes out in English. Something like this can happen again so we need to fortify our faith to endure such humane treatment. Thank-you very much for publishing his story.