

## 103-year old concentration camp survivor tours US

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With each passing year the number of survivors who can provide first-hand testimony about the Holocaust dwindles.

Yet at the age of 103, Jehovah's Witness [Leopold Engleitner](#), purported to be the oldest known male concentration camp survivor, is currently touring the U.S. with the Austrian biographer and filmmaker [Bernhard Rammerstorfer](#).

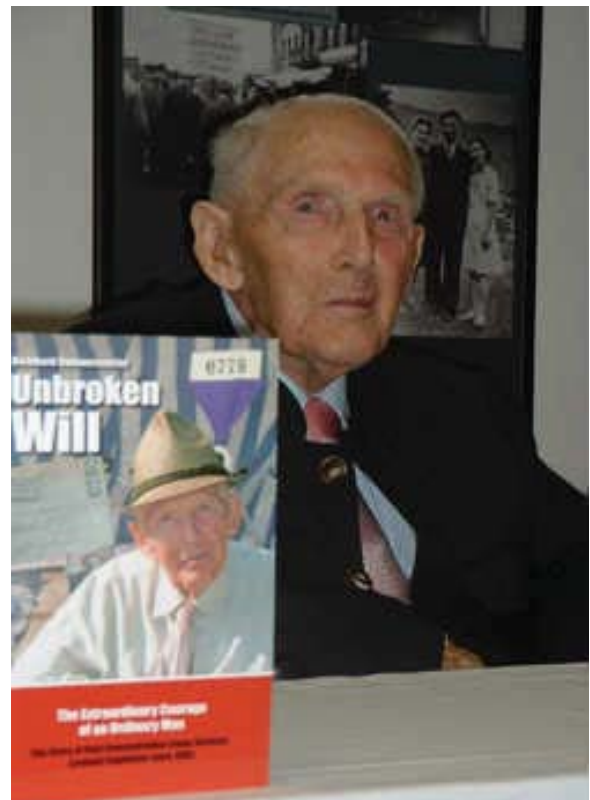
Engleitner, Rammerstorfer, and Robert Buckley, consultant to the [U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) in Washington, D.C., recently made two public appearances in St. Petersburg, Florida. The first was on Wednesday, May 6 at the [Florida Holocaust Museum](#), and the second was on Sunday, May 10 at the [Palladium Theatre at St. Petersburg College](#).

Both talks were part of a 2009 U.S. tour that began with a presentation to a sold-out audience of 400 at Harvard University.

Engleitner's speaking engagement was the third event about Jehovah's Witnesses hosted by the Tampa Bay museum in the past 10 years, according to Carolyn Bass, Director of the [Florida Holocaust Museum](#).

Bass also said that although many institutions claim to recognize that [Jehovah's Witnesses](#) were victimized during the Holocaust, the St. Petersburg museum is one of the only places that have an entire exhibit dedicated to the Christian group. The exhibit, [Jehovah's Witnesses: Faith Under Fire](#), which includes several first-hand stories of courage, refusal, and the struggle to survive, as well as lessons about standing up for one's beliefs and still being tolerant, is available for loan to other institutions.

Engleitner and Rammerstorfer told the capacity crowd of over 250 people at the museum about Engleitner's observations and experiences before, during, and after the Holocaust.



In 1932, Engleitner joined the Jehovah's Witnesses, a group of approximately 35,000 pacifist European Christians who were ostracized by their Austrian countrymen from 1934 to 1938 and were considered enemies of the state after the Nazis occupied Austria in 1938.

When the young farmer was conscripted into Hitler's army in 1939, Engleitner refused to fight and would not agree to sign a declaration rejecting his religious beliefs. Because he steadfastly believed in nonviolence and rejected racism, Engleitner suffered harsh persecution during World War II.

Seventy years ago, Engleitner was arrested by the Gestapo, beaten, and then imprisoned in the first of three [concentration camps](#). There, in the [Buchenwald](#) concentration camp, he saw that "Jews were forced to work like animals...and they were driven by whips."

Engleitner told the audience that Jehovah's Witnesses were treated less harshly than the Jews in the concentration camps. When all of the prisoners were punished and the Jews were deprived of food for six days, the Jehovah's Witnesses, who were given meager rations after three days, shared their food with the Jews.

In July of 1943, Engleitner was released from [Ravensbruck](#) concentration camp, weighing barely 62 pounds, full of sores, and sterile (as a result of a severe beating). He said the guards were glad to see him go at first. Then they changed their minds and hunted him for weeks while he hid in caves in a mountainous region of Austria.

Life remained difficult for Engleitner even after the war ended in 1945. He never quite fit into mainstream Austrian society because of his religious beliefs.

"Although the Nazis took everything from him, he did not lose his optimism or faith," said Rammerstorfer, who has researched, corroborated, and documented Engleitner's remarkable story of survival "to encourage everyone to adhere to their principles."

As the two friends, Engleitner and Rammerstorfer, tour the U.S. for the third time since 2004, Rammerstorfer said that wants audiences to appreciate Engleitner as an example of "an ordinary man who rejected Hitler's regime" and a man who is still determined to teach lessons about peace and tolerance.

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**BOOKS AND DOCUMENTARIES ABOUT LEOPOLD ENGLEITNER:** The latest edition of Bernhard Rammerstorfer's biographical account of Engleitner's life, [Unbroken Will](#), was released at the start of their May [2009 USA Tour](#). A weeklong film screening of the documentary [Unbroken Will](#) and the U.S. premiere of the newest DVD documentary, [Unbroken Will USA Tour](#), is at the Laemmle's Theatre Sunset 5 in West Hollywood, California from May 15 to 21.

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*photo above is Jehovah's Witness Leopold Engleitner at the Florida Holocaust Museum*