

103-year-old Holocaust survivor shares his story

By Sylvie Belmont belmond@theacorn.com



THROUGH HIS EYES—Leopold Engleitner, 103, speaks May 22 at Moorpark College. Born in Austria, Engleitner is the oldest known male Nazi concentration camp survivor. He made the local stop while on tour speaking about his life as told in the book "Unbroken Will" by Bernhard Rammerstorfer.

Brutal conditions and inhumane treatment by Nazi guards left Leopold Engleitner a near skeleton, sterile and with poor hearing but without anger or bitterness.

"If I felt bitterness I only would have harmed myself," said Engleitner, in his native AustrianGerman dialect. "I am happy that I survived and I am still alive."

Engleitner not only survived the horrors of 46 months in three different Nazi concentration camps but, at 103 years old, has lived far longer than anyone could have imagined. He is the oldest known male survivor of the Holocaust.

He urged a packed audience at Moorpark College on May 22 to stand up for their principles, even at the

risk of great personal harm.

Those fortunate enough to find a place inside the college's Performing Arts Center for Engleitner's appearance were touched by the old Austrian farmer's outlook on life.

"I'm amazed by Leopold's attitude," said Beatriz Gutai, wife of Moorpark College film professor Ferenc Gutai, who invited Engleitner to speak in Moorpark as part of his U.S. tour.

An old suitcase and a striped uniform with the purple triangle that Hitler made Jehovah's Witnesses wear sat on a table at the edge of the stage as the softspoken man recalled vivid details of his youth. Engleitner's words were translated by Robert Wagemann, a disabled Jehovah's Witness who escaped euthanasia during World War II.

Engleitner was also accompanied by his biographer, Bernhard Rammerstorfer, whom he met by chance on a park bench in Austria 15 years ago. Although generations apart, the two bonded over Engleitner's story of survival, which is now the subject of a book and a film titled "Unbroken Will."

"What he's taught me is that tolerance, humanity and respect for the rights of others are among the highest ideals and are worth defending even under the most adverse circumstances," Rammerstorfer said.

Engleitner and Adolph Hitler grew up in the same Austrian province.

After leaving the Roman Catholic church to become a Jehovah's Witness, Engleitner was persecuted for his beliefs throughout the 1930s and arrested by the Gestapo for refusing to bear arms in 1939.

Six months after his arrest, Engleitner, then 33, was sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp. He was offered his freedom several times in exchange for renouncing his faith, but he refused. Instead he submitted to years of torture while incarcerated at Buchenwald, Niederhagen and Ravensbrueck.

"Every morning, you would not know whether you would be alive in the evening. It was so dreadful that the hair of 15- and 16-year-olds turned gray in only a few weeks," Engleitner said.

He recalled being forced to work despite debilitating beatings from the guards, narrowly evading a lethal injection into his heart after being taken to a camp infirmary and enduring threats that his life would be extinguished in an oven, but he never abandoned hope that he would live.

He weighed 62 pounds when he was released July 15, 1943, agreeing to be a lifelong farm laborer.

When called to join the retreating German armed forces again in early 1945, Engleitner escaped from the farm and hid in the Alps until the war ended.

In spite of the harm inflicted on him, Engleitner has outlived all his persecutors.

"He won, his convictions kept him alive," said Ojai resident Connie Crockett, a Jehovah's Witness who attended the local event.

About 11 million people were persecuted and murdered during the Holocaust, yet some people still insist it didn't occur, said Robert Buckley, a consultant for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. That, he said, is a testament to the power of propaganda.

"The first casualty of war is truth," he said, thanking the Allies for rescuing victims and documenting what they saw to ensure that the world would never forget.

Auschwitz survivor Renee Firestone, who also spoke at the event, agreed. She said those who deny the Holocaust are rejecting the evidence.

"It's my duty to tell the little I know about the Holocaust," said the Czechoslovakian Jewish woman, who recalled being packed into a cattle car with 120 others toward the end of the war in 1944.