

Oldest known survivor of Nazi concentration camps shares story of unwavering faith

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107-year-old Austrian man was given chance to renounce his faith, but refused - and served in three camps

Born in 1905 with a curved spine, raised in a village not far from where Hitler grew up, the young Leopold Engleitner was horrified by the atrocities of World War I and joined the Jehovah's Witnesses, a pacifist religious group that renounces all political involvement and military service. Captured by the Nazis and given the choice of renouncing his faith or serving in the death camps, he refused. The now 107-year-old Engleitner is considered the oldest living survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, and is the subject of a thrilling new documentary.



The 107-year-old Leopold Engleitner will be guest of honor at the film's Los Angeles screening where with help of an interpreter, he will be talking to audience members.

LOS ANGELES, CA (Catholic Online) - As he recalls in the film "The Ladder in the Lion's Den," when Austria joined the German Reich in 1938, Jehovah's Witnesses were rounded up and unlike their Jewish counterparts, given a choice. Allowed to get out of the camps if they signed a paper, the "the Ladder in the Lions' Den" of the title - which renounced their religion and joined the Nazis.

Engleitner refused - and for the next several year was starved and forced to labor in not one, but three Nazi prisoner camps -- Buchenwald, Niederhagen and Ravensbrueck.

According to the film, many other Austrian Witnesses, along with Engleitner, refused to do so, and many lost their lives. The documentary charts their story, and details Engleitner's own horrific ordeal.

One scene documents the time when, starving on a march back to camp from hard labor, his testicle was crushed by an SS guard's boot.

The incident prevented him from ever fathering children.

The documentary's narrator and script-editor, Frederic Fuss, says that among the things that captivated him from the beginning was "the strength of Leopold's unbroken will and determination never diminished his positive outlook, and the intensity of his trial never made him bitter."

The film, "The Ladder in the Lions' Den," "takes a slice of Leo's experiences and puts them into a more direct historical context.

"You get to the significance of the stand he took as a conscientious objector, not going along with Nazism and its ideals.

"A document was regularly presented to the Jehovah's Witnesses, who were conscientious objectors and who objected to the principles of Nazism, and they did not subscribe to any of the racist ideas.

"To get out of the camp, they were told 'just sign this document where you renounce your beliefs, say you go along with Nazism and go along with Hitler.'

"They [Jehovah's Witnesses] would also not say the 'Heil Hitler' greeting, and the film comments on that, that the words ascribe salvation to Hitler.

"They said, no, he's not God so we're not going to do that.'

Engleitner is still active and tours schools around his home country telling children "You don't need to go along with peer pressure; you can stick by your conscience."

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