



Auschwitz survivor Mel Mermelstein, who died Jan. 28, at 95, was a modest, unprepossessing man.

Whatever celebrity he achieved in life — winning a historic legal campaign against Holocaust deniers, seeing his life dramatized in a television movie starring Leonard Nimoy — he used to further the greater goal of keeping alive the memories of those who did not survive the concentration camps.

Mermelstein is best known for his yearslong challenges to the Institute for Historical Review (IHR) in Torrance, California, and other Holocaust deniers. The revisionist historians questioned the accepted history that millions of European Jews were murdered by the Nazis before and during World War II.

Holocaust experts lauded his work.

“Mel had the courage to take on the Holocaust deniers when no one would dare,” said Michael Berenbaum, founding director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “The stakes were enormous but he prevailed,” he said.

Holocaust scholar Alex Grobman, whose research at Auschwitz Mermelstein assisted, agreed. “Mel Mermelstein’s singular devotion to preserving the memory of the Shoah, at a time when it was not popular, was an inspiration to all of us,” he said.

In 1979, the IHR offered \$50,000 for anyone able to prove that Jews were gassed at Auschwitz, where a teenage Mermelstein was imprisoned, the only member of his family to survive.

The following year, when Mermelstein wrote a letter to the Jerusalem Post about the outrageous offer, the IHR challenged him to prove it. Otherwise, the group said, it would “expose” him.

Mermelstein accepted the challenge. Six years later, the IHR, after first rejecting Mermelstein’s claim, paid him \$90,000 to settle a lawsuit he filed. As part of the settlement, IHR apologized for any emotional damage inflicted on Mermelstein and other former Auschwitz inmates by the initial reward offer.

Nimoy recalled later that Mermelstein told him, “They thought the Jew would cave in. At the simplest level, that’s what’s going on here.”

When Mermelstein first sought help from the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the Anti-Defamation League and other organizations, he said they all advised him to disregard the challenge, suggesting that it was a setup, that it was nothing less than a kangaroo court designed to promote the IHR.

“Mel Mermelstein did a gutsy thing way back in the 1980s when he first took on Holocaust deniers,” Deborah Lipstadt, nominated by President Joe Biden to be the United States Special Envoy for Monitoring and Combating Anti-Semitism, told the Washington Post.

“Many people thought it was a foolhardy thing to do, but he went ahead and did it anyway, and he won,” she said, adding that in her own subsequent battle with British Holocaust denier David Irving, she had been inspired by Mermelstein.

After the 1985 settlement, five additional lawsuits and countersuits were filed by Mermelstein and the IHR in state and federal courts in Orange and Los Angeles Counties, some ultimately dismissed and consolidated.

A year after the settlement, in 1986, Mermelstein won a \$5.5 million verdict from a Los Angeles jury, against Ditlieb Felderer, an editorial adviser to the IHR.

In April of 1991, “Never Forget” aired nationally on the cable network TNT. Mermelstein had a cameo in the film, playing his father, a decision that bordered on the traumatic. “When I looked in the mirror when I was all made up, I was frightened,” he recalled. “I saw my father in me.”

The film, he said, represented a “culmination” of his crusade and the fulfillment of a promise he made in 1944 in Auschwitz. “I made a promise to my father in the camp that I would tell what happened if I did survive.”

Some of the film's final scenes were shot at Mermelstein's lumberyard on Kol Nidre, the beginning of Yom Kippur fast and the Jewish calendar's holiest night. Mermelstein, on the scene, was unconcerned by the apparent contradiction. "God and I have made a deal – I've fasted enough. I observe in my soul. I've been forgiven. We agreed."

In an interview the night the drama was broadcast, Nimoy said he had rarely been as affected by a role as he had by "Never Forget."

I got to know Mermelstein in the late 1980s, when I began covering him for the Orange County Edition of the Los Angeles Times. By that time, his battle against the IHR was making its torturous way through the court system in fits and starts, with the help of an Irish Catholic lawyer. I continued to chronicle his story through the production and airing of "Never Forget."

Mermelstein, considering he had picked such a public fight, was surprisingly self-effacing and soft-spoken.

Our first meeting was at his vest pocket, handmade Holocaust exhibit, a 1,000-square-foot structure perched on the edge of Mermelstein's Huntington Beach lumberyard. Not by accident did it resemble one of the infamous railroad box cars that transported Jews and others to the camps.

The museum was, to be sure, a long way from the paneled lobby of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, much less the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. And yet, perhaps because of its intimacy and Mermelstein's soft-spoken curation, it made a deep impression on me, as I imagine it did for the small groups of Huntington Beach schoolchildren who visited it. Given the scale of the Holocaust, the exhibit brought the horror into focus, with photos, bits of barbed wire and striped camp uniforms.

It was a scene recreated in "Never Forget," using local school students to ask Nimoy, as Mermelstein, and – off camera – Mermelstein himself. Watching the scene, Robert Radnitz, the film's producer, told me: "If there was ever any question as to why we're making this picture – there's the answer."

For all the distance Mermelstein traveled from Auschwitz, some of the experience never left him. The hunger of the camps was so etched in his consciousness, he said, he always carried pieces of bread and other food in his jacket pocket wherever he went.