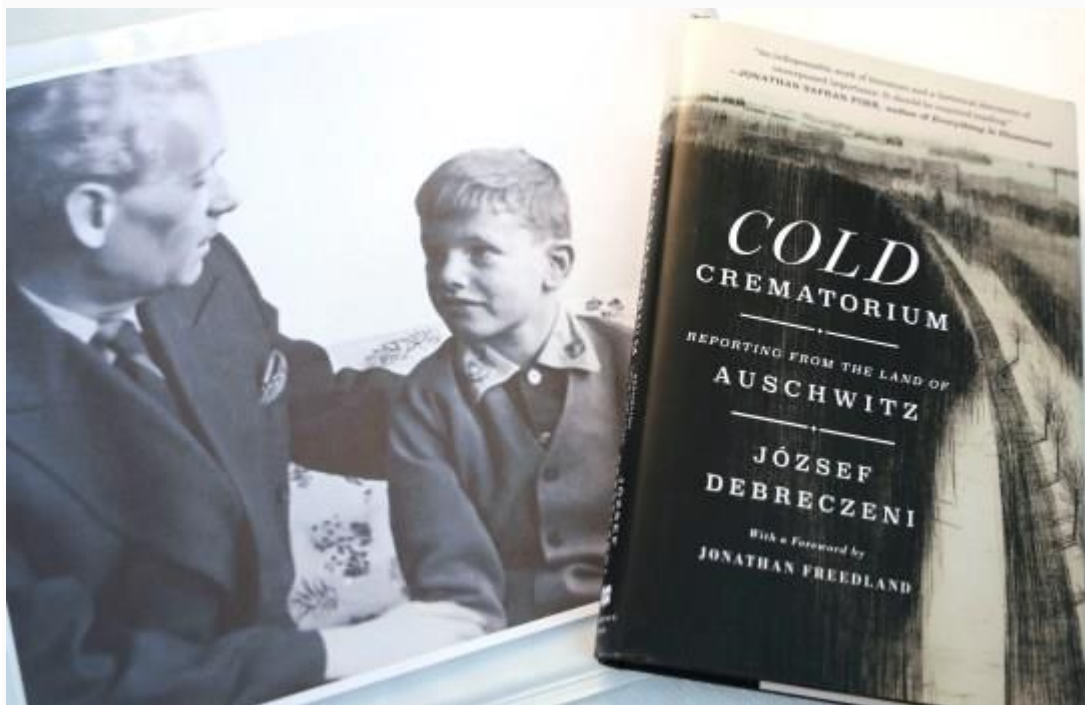


SOUTH FLORIDA SunSentinel

Boca man set out to publish uncle's Holocaust memoir — it landed on NY Times list



By [LOIS K. SOLOMON](#) | South Florida Sun Sentinel

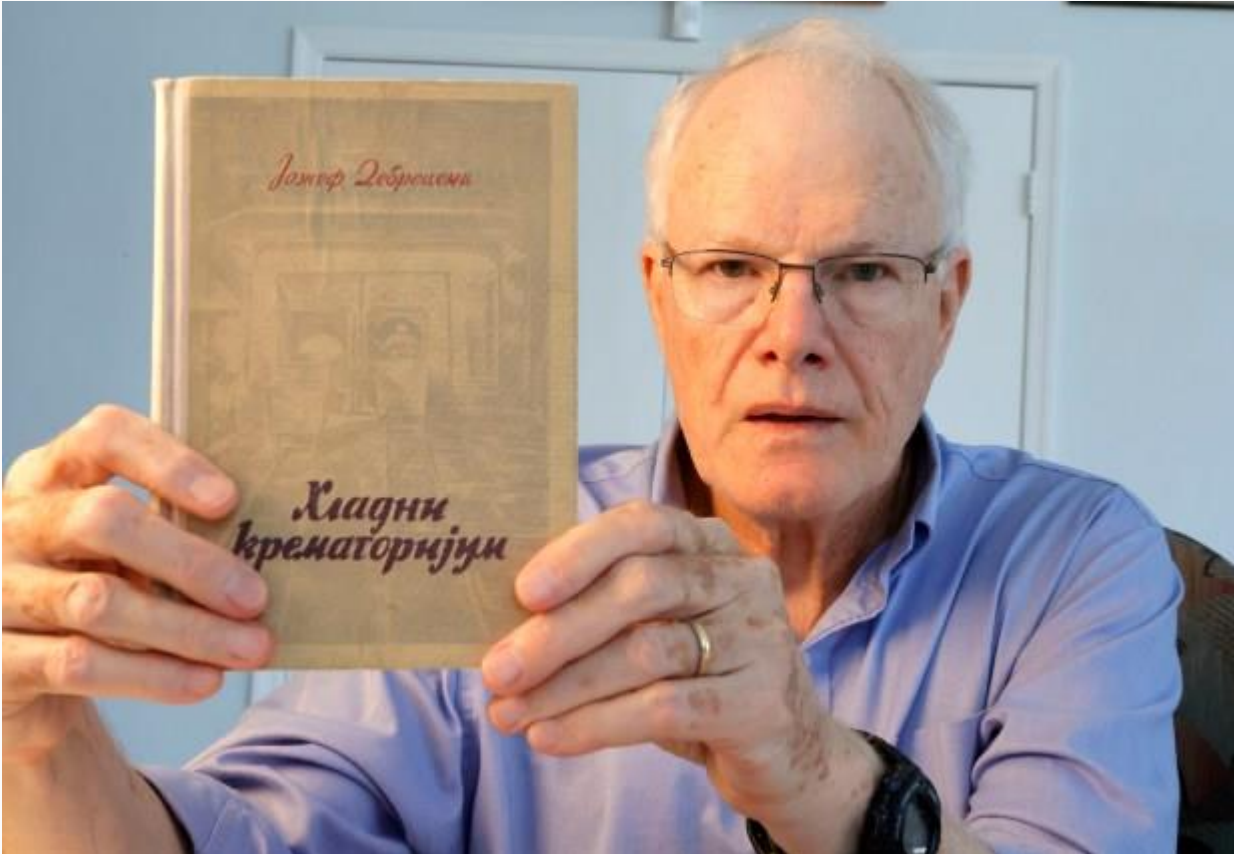
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The memoir's title is unsettling: "Cold Crematorium: Reporting from the Land of Auschwitz."

What's a cold crematorium? It's what concentration camp prisoners cynically named the barracks where the starving and ailing were dumped and left to die. As the author, Holocaust survivor József Debreczeni, remembered: "I am burning in the cold crematorium."

Boca Raton resident Alexander Bruner knew Debreczeni, his uncle, had written this searing and evocative narrative in 1950 about his experiences in these barracks and slave labor camps during World War II. But the book had been published in only two languages, Hungarian in 1950 and Serbo-Croatian in 1951, preventing widespread dissemination.

Bruner decided to make large-scale publication of the book his first retirement project. In 2019, he began working to find a translator, then an agent and then a publisher, financing the translator with his own money.



The results have been stunning. "Cold Crematorium" has been published in 12 languages and is winning impressive and deeply felt reviews, including a place on the New York Times' list of ["10 Best Books of 2024."](#)

"It's an enormous feeling of satisfaction," said Bruner, 73, a retired management consultant and nonprofit fundraiser. "One of the things my father most regretted in his life was that the book was never published more widely."

Debraczeni was Bruner's father's older brother. The brothers and their youngest brother survived the Holocaust, as did Bruner's mother.

Debraczeni was born in Budapest in 1905, the eldest of the three sons, and in adulthood worked as a journalist for a local newspaper. He was dismissed due to anti-Jewish laws in Hungary in 1938 and in 1941 was conscripted into a forced labor battalion. In 1944, he was deported to Auschwitz. His wife and parents were also sent to the notorious camp and were killed upon arrival.

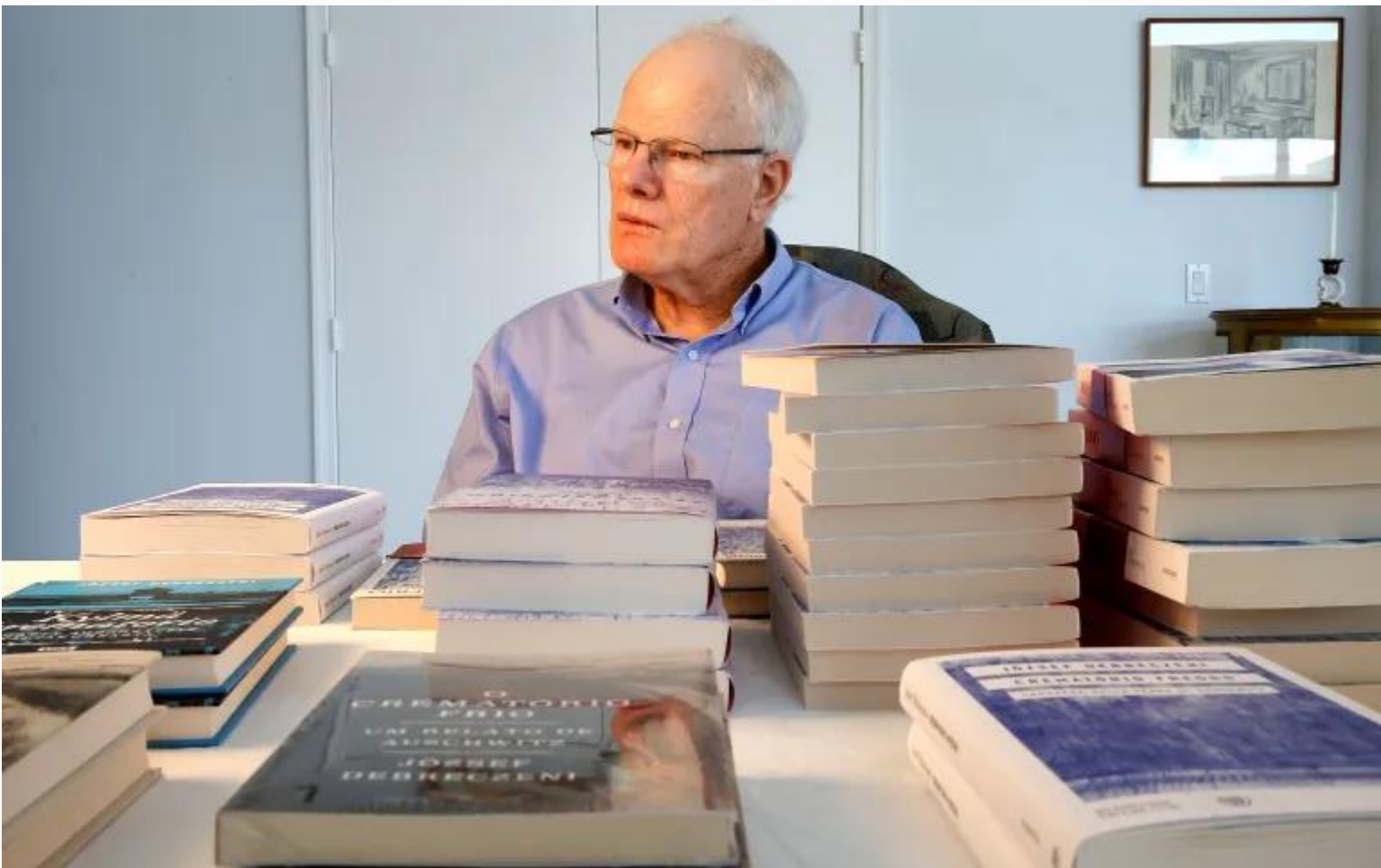
The journalist's year at Auschwitz consisted of ceaseless torture and humiliation. He recalled being told to transfer to one of Auschwitz's sub-camps.

"Surely I couldn't end up in a place much worse, I thought — and how tragically wrong I was," he wrote.

Subsisting on almost no food, he hauled steel rail tracks; at another camp, he became a miner. His final stop before liberation was the cold crematorium, where the Nazis stacked prisoners in bunks just above their own excrement to die. The book describes the ubiquitous lice, the search for a crumb of bread, the hierarchy of prisoners who are cruel to each other as they attempt to survive.

"Those who'd made nothing of themselves — schnorrers, nebbishes, schlemiels, freeloaders, rogues, swindlers, idlers, slackers — all blossomed in this swamp," he wrote.

After the war, Debreczeni moved to Belgrade, then the capital of the former Yugoslavia, and decided to write about his experiences. After his wife, Lenka, was killed at Auschwitz, he never remarried. He worked again as a journalist but also as a novelist and poet, and died in 1978. He is buried at the Jewish cemetery in Belgrade, now in Serbia.



Bruner, born in 1951, said his uncle's book was on the shelves of his childhood home in Belgrade. His father, who survived the Holocaust by fleeing on foot to the Adriatic coast and joining partisan fighters, was an official at the Yugoslavian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His mother, whose parents were also killed at Auschwitz, worked as a forced laborer during the war, jumped from a train and

broke her shoulder in an attempt at escape, then was transferred to the Theresienstadt camp. She was liberated in 1945 at age 19.

As the son of a Yugoslavian diplomat, Bruner lived in several countries growing up, including the United States and Brazil. He remembers his father expressing frustration about not finding an American publisher for his uncle's memoir, believing the publishers feared antisemitism and were concerned about glorifying the Soviets, who liberated Auschwitz, during a time of anti-communist fever in the United States.

More than 50 years later, Bruner made it his goal to show publishers the exceptional literary merit of "Cold Crematorium." He chose Paul Olchvary, who specialized in translations of Hungarian literature, to transcribe it into English.

As [The Times of London](#) wrote, Olchvary "has rendered Debreczeni's prose into a literary diamond — sharp-edged and crystal clear. Like the works of Primo Levi and Vasily Grossman, this is a haunting chronicle of rare, unsettling power."

Bruner said he and the translator agonized over word choices. They wanted the text to sound relevant to contemporary audiences but still be an authentic rendering of Debreczeni's prose.

In 2022, Bruner's literary agent attended the Frankfurt Book Fair and found several interested publishers. Bruner ultimately chose three, all serving different markets: St. Martin's Press, Jonathan Cape and Vintage. All royalties are shared between him and his sister and are donated to Holocaust education, Bruner said.

But even amid the joy of widespread publication and supportive reviews, Bruner thinks back on his father, who tried so desperately to get the book published in English.

"The success has been way above what I anticipated," Bruner said. "I wish that my uncle and my father could see it."

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