

COLD CREMATORIUM

Reporting from the Land of Auschwitz

FOREWORD BY JONATHAN FREEDLAND

József Debreczeni

Cold Crematorium

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REPORTING FROM THE LAND OF AUSCHWITZ

József Debreczeni

Translated from the Hungarian by
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Foreword by
Jonathan Freedland



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To the memory of my loved ones

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József Debreczeni with his parents and his wife. Only József would survive Auschwitz; the rest were murdered upon their arrival at the camp.



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József Debreczeni at his desk

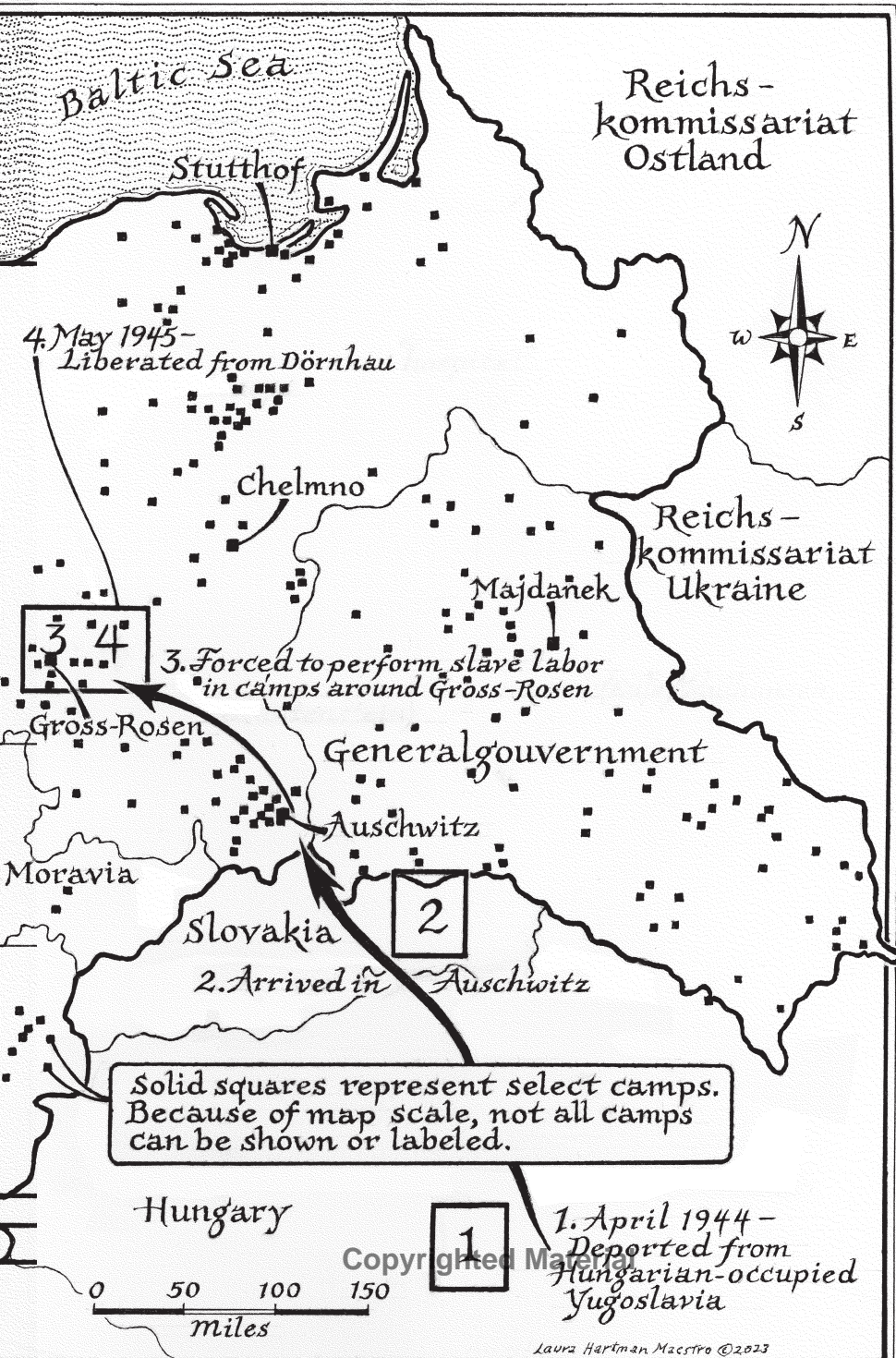
What is any damn thing worth
While weeds run riot over earth
And poisons fail to crush it?
What's winter or the summer for
When my mother's murderer
Still lives and thrives a fascist?
He may yet live or he may not
He may yet breathe and stuff his gut
The priest might have absolved him
He won't be haunted, live in fear,
A song might nestle in his ear
And sunlight may well bronze him.
Heroes and prophets pass him by
Poetry, science, leave him dry:
Are there blessings set and waiting?
Mothers have been born in vain
Into the gas chambers they came
Their children at breast, suckling
It leaves him laughing as they go
The gas once more begins to flow
Time grinds out hell's new kingdom
Dagger and atom now align
More dreadful still when they combine,
Pick up where they began
What is man expecting now?
What point in beating breast or brow?
While showers spew out murder?
All his guilt is in the past.
He finds a new uniform at last,
And poses where he killed her.

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Translated by George Szirtes

Debrecezeni's Journey From Deportation to Liberation





Reichs-kommissariat Ostland



4. May 1945 - Liberated from Dörnhau

3 4

3. Forced to perform slave labor in camps around Gross-Rosen

2

2. Arrived in Auschwitz

Solid squares represent select camps. Because of map scale, not all camps can be shown or labeled.

1

1. April 1944 - Deported from Hungarian-occupied Yugoslavia

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Foreword

The laws of physics dictate that the farther away an object is, the smaller it appears. But the Holocaust does not obey that rule. The Nazi attempt to eliminate the Jewish people is eight decades away, and yet it only seems to loom larger, the scale of the horror more striking and more shocking as it grows more distant. What's more, instead of becoming blurrier as it recedes from view, we now see it in sharper detail. That is thanks in no small part to the emergence—or exhumation—of remarkable accounts like this one by József Debreczeni.

In a way, it makes a perverse sense that the Holocaust should defy what we think of as the laws of nature. For those were devised for Planet Earth, while the Holocaust seemed to take place in a different realm altogether. One survivor famously spoke of Planet Auschwitz, a place where the usual laws of moral gravity did not apply, where evil was good, black was white, and night was day. Debreczeni nods in that same direction toward the close of this book. After liberation, he meets people from “the outside world . . . They are the Martians of the universe beyond the barbed wire.”

Debreczeni's testimony itself has reached us like a message from a distant planet, his words arriving decades after he set

them down. First published in 1950, in the relative freedom of Tito's Yugoslavia, where the Budapest-born Debreczeni lived after the war, they were lost for a while in the static of the cold war: the author's praise for his Red Army liberators deemed too much for the anti-communist stomachs of the West, while his insistence that it was Jews, rather than the more nebulous category of "victims of fascism," who had been singled out for annihilation proved unpalatable to the Stalinists of the East. In a Yugoslavia non-aligned between the two power blocs, Debreczeni found an audience initially receptive to his story—which was written in Hungarian, one of the country's official minority languages, and produced by a state-owned publisher. But that did not last long. By the 1960s and 1970s, Yugoslavia had become a colder house for Jews.

Still, now we have the book—and it was worth the wait. The library of Holocaust testimony is vast and expanding; nevertheless, Debreczeni delivers something of singular value. It's not only that his are the recollections of a fully conscious adult—when so many accounts are, necessarily, confined to the memories of a child—but that he writes as a professional, highly skilled observer. He is a good noticer, with a journalist's eye for the telling, human detail. Crammed with other Jews from the Bačka region of Serbia into the goods train that will take them to Auschwitz, he sees Mr. Mandel, an old man, a friend of his father's, a carpenter, now deprived of the cigarettes that had been his staple:

"For sixty years he'd smoked fifty a day. Not a man alive had ever seen Mr. Mandel without a smoldering cigarette . . . On the train his right hand sometimes moved mechanically, as if holding a cigarette. Between his index and middle fingers Mr. Mandel

raised the imagined cigarette to wilted lips. Like a child pretending to smoke, he even pursed his lips to puff.”

Good as he is at seeing the trees, Debreczeni never loses sight of the larger forest. He grasps that he is now a witness to the darkest possibilities of human nature, that he is seeing the desperate depths to which people will sink when they are deprived of the essentials for physical survival, none more basic than food. He is witness, survivor, victim, and also analyst, offering ruminations on some of the enduring questions raised by the Holocaust, among them the puzzle of how arguably the most cultured nation in Europe could have led the continent’s descent into the most brutal savagery:

“This is a singular people. A bunch of inner contradictions, a bunch of dumbfounding extremes, a singular people that has given the world not only [Nobel Prize winner] Robert Koch but also Ilse Koch, the Witch of Buchenwald, the most perverse woman serial killer of all time, not only [the astronomer] Kepler, but also Himmler . . . Both those obsessed with understanding and the gravediggers of civilization.”

The result is a book that, across a mere two-hundred-odd pages, shines a light into corners of the Shoah we may not have seen. Of course, some observations will be familiar enough, though they are put here starkly—starting with the cruelty that became routine on that bleak planet. We see one tormentor, supposedly a medic, “jump up and down on a patient’s chest like a rubber ball, stomping on him with bloodshot eyes until he was worn out. The victim’s crime: he’d tried conniving his way to a second helping of soup.” Debreczeni also reminds us that the victims did not know their imminent fate—a fact crucial to understanding how the Final Solution was possible—and that

so many others most certainly did. Describing his journey to the death camp, the author writes: “None of us . . . knew about Auschwitz. But the bayonet-adorned Hungarian policemen the Germans had positioned every fifty meters along the road, they knew.” That same sentence carries a reminder that, while the eradication of the Jews may have been a project initiated by Berlin, it relied on accomplices recruited across occupied Europe, many only too eager to join the mission of extermination. Active collaboration was aided by the willful blindness of those who, despite living at or near the scene of the crime, would later claim to have seen nothing. At one point, Debreczeni describes a passenger train that passes alongside wagons packed with deportees—“No one looked twice at us”—and wonders, “had death trains become an everyday sight by now?”

Much of what is laid bare in *Cold Crematorium* will come as a shock even to those who consider themselves broadly familiar with the facts of the Holocaust. For what does the average twenty-first-century citizen know of Auschwitz? Perhaps that Jews arrived in cattle cars and were led into what they thought were showers, where they were gassed to death, their bodies turned to ash in ovens. This account, like others published in recent years, shows how incomplete that picture is.

For one thing, Debreczeni was only briefly in the camp we think of as Auschwitz. Instead, he was held in three separate subcamps within a vast network that stretched across the region: those three were satellites of Gross-Rosen, which itself was initially a subcamp of Sachsenhausen. Debreczeni referred to this broader archipelago of horror as “The Land of Auschwitz.” Here, those Jews who had survived the initial selection—sent not to the left, to be gassed, but to the right, so that they might

be worked to death—were used as slaves, fed almost nothing, kept in conditions that would shame livestock, and subjected to permanent, arbitrary violence. They were tasked with the most back-breaking work: it might be mining or the excavation and construction of subterranean tunneling—apparently to create an underground refuge for German forces facing defeat and retreat.

Their daily tormentors were not, as many readers might imagine, only Nazi Germans or even the Nazis' local collaborators wearing the gray-green uniforms of the SS. In this book, the Germans are mostly out of view and off stage: they are the ultimate authority, the masters of the camp, but their will is done by others. Those others are the kapos, the prisoners picked—often entirely at random—to serve as the Nazis' enforcers, armed both with truncheons and, deployed no less cruelly, the power to distribute the camp's meager resources—the most precious of which is food.

These are the men whom the author and, thanks to the precision of his pen, his reader come to despise. When all around them are starving, each prisoner allocated no more than the exact, scientifically calculated minimum number of calories required for a human being to survive—“just enough nutrients, absolutely necessary to maintain life. To maintain it, not to protect it. The latter isn't important at all”—those kapos charged with handing out bread or ladling out soup show their fellow inmates a callousness that will disturb anyone who imagined solidarity among slaves. They skim off a bit of each portion for themselves and their chums, using their gains for trade. Debreczeni discovers that, even as he and others were subsisting on slivers of bread, margarine, and soup too thin to merit the name, a

matter of yards away, in his locked quarters, one of these super-*kapos* had amassed “boxes upon boxes of cheese and mountains of bread.” Sometimes their brutality is more direct. That sadist who made a sport of jumping up and down on the bellies and chests of frail, famished men too weak to resist: he was not an SS officer but a fellow prisoner.

To be clear, Debreczeni knows who the true villains are. He knows that when a senior *kapo* administers fifty lashes of the whip to a luckless inmate, he does so with vigor because standing over him is the SS sergeant who ordered the flogging—and “if the camp god suspects shenanigans it often happens that the blows continue on the head of the one meting out the sentence.”

He understands the psychological trick that is being played on him and the rest of the *häftlinge*, or prisoners, directing their loathing away from the lords of the Auschwitz universe and toward those who, to secure their own survival, have become the masters’ henchmen. It is a “diabolically imaginative Nazi system” that understands and exploits human nature, including that “old supposition—proven true on countless occasions—that the best slave driver is a slave accorded a privileged position.” The Nazis can maintain total control over three thousand men with just two hundred men of their own in part because they have guns, but also because they have deployed the timeless stratagem of the conqueror: divide and rule.

Debreczeni describes all this as both guinea pig in and observer of a vicious social experiment. He is struck not only by the speed with which a new pecking order takes shape, how fast a fresh *kapo* kingpin is surrounded by courtiers, but also by the pattern that prevails among the Jewish members of the enforcer class: “Such towering figures of the Auschwitz hierarchy

were recruited from among those who, back home, had stood on the bottom rungs of Jewish society. Those who'd made nothing of themselves—schnorrers, nebbishes, schlemiels, freeloaders, rogues, swindlers, idlers, slackers—all blossomed in this swamp.”

The author notices too a crucial fact that has eluded many—though not all—chroniclers of the Holocaust. Perhaps because murder is a graver crime than larceny, the economic function of Auschwitz is too often overlooked. But Debreczeni sees it. He understands that the worldly goods of those shipped to Auschwitz in freight trains, whether they be clothes, shoes, human hair, or gold teeth, were dispatched to Germany for sale or use—that the Jews were a resource to be exploited to the last ounce, their possessions, their labor, and their bodies a means for the Reich either to make or save money.

The details he provides on this are stark. Debreczeni names names, spelling out precisely which German corporations maintained an on-the-ground presence, using Jewish slaves as their workforce. In the subcamp of Eule, for example, he reports, “The work is carried out by three companies. The Waldenburg branch of Georg Urban Civil and Structural Engineering AG leases most of the digging work; Kemna AG drills tunnels; and Baugesellschaft builds the structures in what is planned to be a sprawling city of barracks.”

These companies were so embedded in the death camp, so integrated in its operations, that prisoners would have company names on their striped uniforms. Officials of these companies acted as overseers and slavemasters, cheerfully reporting to the SS those Jewish inmates they deemed to be slacking—thereby sentencing them to death. A reporter to his fingertips, Debreczeni supplies the key facts: “For my labor the company pays

Hitler's state two marks a day to cover my 'board' and my 'apparel,' and I harbor no illusions that I won't have to earn this sum with blood."

The SS architects of the Land of Auschwitz always intended it to be an economic hub, a throbbing industrial center, but there is another, more intimate economy Debreczeni describes. Once more, as if from the pages of a study in anthropology, he sketches the illicit trade among the prisoners themselves—in crumbs, morsels, and discarded cigarette ends, the currency of those who have nothing.

"It's become widespread practice for even the living to sell the treasures lurking in their oral cavities. A whole army of *häftlinge* has come to specialize in extracting gold for modest compensation from the mouths of those who volunteer. It's mainly the kitchen workers who buy such gold, in exchange for soup. One gold crown yields special soup every day for a week. That's the going rate."

Yet, what readers might well remember most vividly from this book is its unflinching account of the sheer repulsiveness of camp life. None of this is for the squeamish. But Debreczeni is insistent that we understand what life is like for people denied the fundamentals of human existence: to eat, to drink, to wash.

Disease and lice are everywhere. "Our blankets are swarming with silvery-glistening colonies of larvae." Underwear is a rare treasure. If you have it, you look after it, like the man who, using a needle, "strove tirelessly to exterminate the lice larvae from under the hems of [his] underpants." There is no sanitation. "Every couple of minutes we move over and squat, emptying pus. Bouts of diarrhea afflict some men twenty times a day."

Debreczeni's voyage into hell ends in a hospital camp, maintained because, as the Allies approached, the Nazis feared being caught red-handed engaged in obvious mass murder. There the living bunk up alongside the dead and dying. Those confined to "bed" share it with men who, in the last seconds of life, involuntarily empty their bowels. Sometimes the surviving inmates prop up the corpse to look as if it is still alive: that way they might receive the dead man's food ration:

"The 'pot' is a dented tin bucket into which those who can't get up relieve themselves—assuming it reaches them in time. Those who carry the pots are usually deaf to the wailing cries urging them to come. The bucket nearly always arrives late, and the bedridden person either soils himself or, more often, does his business on the floor. Everyone has diarrhea. Hence the horrid yellow streams along the rows of beds."

These are people treated like animals who, sooner than you might expect, behave like animals. Debreczeni notices the transformation early, during that fetid, starved, parched journey in the cattle trucks, when the Nazis put their Jewish captives on "four legs" for the first time. On arrival in the Auschwitz main camp, just after they have had all their body hair shaved off, a guard shrieks an order:

"Open your snouts!"

We understood all too well: not mouths, but snouts."

Debreczeni is a writer so, naturally, he notices that the first step toward dehumanization is taken through language. Unsentimentally, he records that this loss of humanity was an internal process as well as an external one: shorn of their clothes, their possessions, their hair, their name, prisoners ceased to be who

they were, even to themselves. In the subcamp of Fürstenstein, a fellow inmate introduces himself: “My name was Farkas. Dr. Farkas.” The past tense of that sentence lingers.

Indeed, it comes as a jolt each time the author reminds you that these feral beings were once people, with individual lives—that the slave who just dropped dead in front of Debreczeni was, back home, known for the “provincial elegance” of his dress, that the man who speaks with now-dead loved ones in his sleep was “a wholesaler,” back when they all lived on Planet Earth. The recollection of these small details is an act of defiance in itself, an insistence on restoring the humanity of those forcibly deprived of it.

Again and again come observations both poignant and arresting. The author tells us that when people are reduced to skin and bone, their only drive is for sustenance. “The body can have only one desire: to eat . . . There is no sexuality in the Land of Auschwitz.” That’s only in part down to hunger. It is also because prisoners who have inhabited “a chamber of horrors full of sores and boils oozing disgust” have come to be repelled by the human body itself.

And we learn of an urge rarely discussed, given that readers are presumed to prefer uplifting stories of survival that testify to the resilience of the human spirit. Candidly, Debreczeni notes, repeatedly, the descent into madness of those around him and the lure of suicide. “One day you suddenly imagine death to be like some sumptuous, refreshing steam bath,” one prisoner says. The author himself confesses that “the thought of imminent death [has] become outright desirable.”

This is an account of grinding pain and wicked barbarity, but it is punctuated by moments of intense drama. In Eule, the

ultimate kapo, the dreaded “elder” of the camp, is a man named Max. One day, it falls to him to read out a list of two thousand people—by number, not name—who are to stand in a separate column. It takes him a full two hours, number after number, as each man identified trembles with fear. “Max reads out the numbers in a booming voice. All at once he happens upon his own. He must call that out, too; there’s no appeal.” The “camp god” has selected himself.

Debreczeni knows how incredible, in the literal sense, all this is. In the Auschwitz main camp, a fellow prisoner from France points out the chimneys, spewing out the “filthy smoke” of mass murder. “If one day someone writes about what is happening over there, they’ll be seen as either crazy or as a perverse liar,” the man says. Like several of those trapped by the Nazi killing machine, Debreczeni understood at the time that, in the future, there would be those whose response to the Holocaust would be to deny such horror ever happened. This painful, absorbing book is an unanswerable reply.

—Jonathan Freedland

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Part I

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