

Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote a novel about what it was like to be a prisoner in a Stalinist forced-labor camp in Siberia's GULAG. Based on his own experience, he called it *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

This clip is from a film, produced as a joint venture between British and Norwegian film makers, which is so faithful to *One Day* that it almost seems like an illustrated version of the book.

The story follows Ivan Denisovich Shukhov as he does his best to exist in a camp where he - and the other prisoners (called "zeks") - never have enough of anything that is physically life-sustaining. They live in a hostile environment where the temperature hovers around 27 degrees below zero.

At this Siberian labor camp - one of many which dotted Russia's northern landscape at the time - Ivan is ill. He, like millions of people sent to the GULAG on some charge or another, is actually a slave of the Soviet Union.

Known by the numbers which they wear on the front and back of their outerwear - not to mention on the front of their caps - the zeks eat barely nourishing food. One of the dishes is boiled grass which has no taste and leaves a person hungry (despite its half-pound weight).

Guards systematically attempt to break the spirit of people working in the camps. Most prisoners, however, value their ability to work - and to create things with their hands (like the power-station building Ivan and his fellow zeks are constructing in the middle of nowhere).

The prisoners also learn something profound during their long captivity. They - and *only* they - are in charge of their own attitudes about themselves. Despite the authority guards (and government) exert over them - and - no matter how horrific the circumstances of one's existence, human beings are intrinsically valuable. Even if the "authorities" strip-away everything else, they can *never* take away the inherent value of a living, breathing human being.

That power - the ultimate power one has over oneself - belongs to each individual and to *no one* else. Ivan thus learns something profound in the camp. The *only* one who can dehumanize an individual is the individual him/herself. One can choose - or not choose - to believe what the guards continually say: That the zeks are "scum."

At the end of Ivan's day, he is still in charge of himself. *He* controls his attitude. *He* is in charge of his own self-worth. He is *not* scum.

And ... at the end of every zek's day, the zek remains in charge of his/her own dignity. The GULAG - a place the Soviets created to strip away an individual's humanity (among other things) - is ultimately unable to achieve one of its primary objectives. It fails, without prisoner cooperation, as a place to destroy the human spirit.

Given the above, it is astonishing that Solzhenitsyn's book, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, was published at all in the Soviet Union of 1962.

Timing of its appearance as a serialized story in the journal *Novy Mir* ("New World"), during November of 1962, is noteworthy. Publication occurred barely a month after the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Those events had brought the world's two superpowers to the brink of nuclear war. The publication of *One Day* was equally impactful on the world's literary scene, particularly in the Soviet Union.

Twenty years later, the BBC interviewed the author who recounted the series of events which had opened publication's door:

For [One Day] to appear in print in the Soviet Union, one needed truly extraordinary circumstances as well as the participation of exceptional personalities. If Tvardovsky had not been the Editor-in-Chief of [Novy Mir, the magazine which first serialized Solzhenitsyn's novel], the work would certainly not have been published. And if Khrushchev had not been in power at this time, the publication could not have gone forward either. Nor would it have done so, moreover, if Khrushchev had not chosen this very moment to launch another attack on Stalin.

The appearance of my tale in the Soviet Union of 1962 could thus be compared to a phenomenon that defies physical laws, a situation where objects would rise instead of falling, or cold stones would grow hot of their own accord. It was impossible, simply impossible! The system was designed in such a way that for forty-five years it let nothing through, but there it was, confronted by this sudden breach. So it is clear that Tvardovsky, Khrushchev, and the specific circumstances had to interact in just the right way for the publication to take place.

Of course I could have sent my work abroad to be published there, but as I can now see from the reactions of Western socialists, if One Day had appeared [only] in the West, these people would have claimed that it was all a lie, that nothing of the kind had ever happened, that no prison camps had ever existed, and that no exterminations had occurred. That they remained silent is due solely to the fact that the text was published in Moscow with the approval of the Central Committee [of the Communist Party]; that's what shook them up. (Solzhenitsyn, quoted by Alexis Klimoff in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich: A Critical Companion*, at pages 103-104.)

When it was first published, *One Day* was an astonishing success in the Soviet Union (not to mention elsewhere in the world). In 1970, Solzhenitsyn was awarded the [Nobel Prize in Literature](#). Then - after the fall of [Khrushchev](#) and the advent of [Brezhnev](#) - the [tide turned against Solzhenitsyn](#), once again. He was deported, in 1974.

Living most of his twenty years-in-exile, in the state of Vermont, Solzhenitsyn was not always impressed by Western values. He could not return to the land of his birth until Gorbachev restored his citizenship in 1990.

He came [back to Russia](#), in 1994, and [died in Moscow](#) - at the age of 89 - in 2008.

See, also:

[***One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* - Part 2**](#)

[***One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* - Part 3**](#)

[***One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* - Part 4**](#)

[***One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* - Part 5**](#)

[***One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* - Part 6**](#)

[***One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* - Part 7**](#)

[***One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* - Part 8**](#)

[***One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* - Part 9**](#)

[***One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* - Part 10**](#)

Credits:

Clip from [*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*](#) (1970). The film is a joint British-Norwegian production mostly filmed, in very cold weather, in Norway. Copyright, Norsk Film A/S, all rights reserved. Online, courtesy YouTube. Provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the film.

Director:

Caspar Wrede

Screenplay (based on Solzhenitsyn's book):

Ronald Harwood

Cinematography:

Sven Nykvist

Hans Nord

Starring:

[Tom Courtenay](#) - Ivan Denisovich Shukov

Espen Skjønberg - Tiurin

Alf Malland - Fetiukov

Production Companies:

Group W Films LLC

Leontes

Norsk Film

Year of Release - 1970

Run time: 101 minutes

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/One-Day-in-the-Life-of-Ivan-Denisovich0>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/One-Day-in-the-Life-of-Ivan-Denisovich0>