

Survival, Adaptability and Resilience of the Human Spirit in ‘One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich’

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Abstract

Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich ” is a book which actually deals with the real story of the protagonist’s struggle for survival and his perseverance under inhumane conditions. What hits the readers the most in this autobiographical novel is that it is more than just a story – it divulges the catastrophe of one day in the life of a person caught between the chaos of the war and the faceless entity that controls his life. The psychology of continued existence and resilience of the human spirit in the face of a brutalizing environment is part of what has made ‘One Day in the Life’ as a Noble Prize winning book. This little novel fought a big fight and it was because of this book that Solzhenitsyn paid a heavy price and he was forced to live in exile for several decades.

The present paper deals with the real story of the protagonist’s struggle for survival and his adaptability under inhumane conditions. In spite of the strong biting winds with frigid climate when the food is barely nutritional enough to keep the prisoners alive, the art of adaptability and resilience in Ivan Denisovich Shukhov helps him learn how to stay warm and make the most out of those brutal conditions in the prison. So, the present paper voices -- ‘Is survival the only and most important goal, or are there limits and ways to what a person can and should do to stay alive?’ Shukhov adapted all the qualities necessary to survive. He had confidence, but it was his adaptableness that helped him cope with the realities of this life. The paper portrays a man whose spirit is strong enough to triumph over the most extreme adversity. What is best about this paper is as, in the words of Oscar Wilde “Although we are all in the gutter, some of us are looking at the stars”.

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich by Alexander Solzhenitsyn counts among the best classics of world literature. An unforgettable portrait of the entire world of Stalin's forced work camps, the novel exposes the story of a Russian soldier's life in a Siberian labour camp around the time of World War II. In his preface Alexander Tvardovsky quotes as:

The effect of this novel, which is so unusual for its honesty and harrowing truth, is to unburden our minds of the things thus far unspoken, but which had to be said. It thereby strengthens and ennoble us. The power of the novel is such that we too can share this feeling.¹

What the readers love about this book is that it is never simply the story of a victim. It portrays an ordinary workingman who is a victim of terrible circumstances but surviving due to his extraordinary skill of adaptability and resilience:

He is a humble, utterly bewildered plain man who wants nothing more than to live out a normal working life as best he can. He struggles pathetically to maintain his honesty, self-respect and pride in a hopeless battle with mysterious forces that seem determined—for reasons beyond his ken—to destroy his human dignity, to deny him his right to love his country and to render meaningless the work of his hands.²

The present paper deals with the struggle for survival and the psychology of adaptability and resilience of the human spirit under inhumane conditions. The protagonist is wrongly accused of committing treason and is arrested and condemned 10 years of imprisonment in the camp. The moment we meet him he has survived the camps for more than eight years as a consummate survivor because he has a positive attitude, practical skills, and a strong sense of moral and ethical integrity. During these years he has acclimated himself to the system he is not even sure he wants to leave which might not be a bad thing inasmuch as the authorities have a habit of arbitrarily extending a prisoner's sentence just when he thinks he'll be freed. The protagonist is a symbol of the human spirit and its never-ending will to survive, even through the harshest of conditions. He believes in the words of his first gang boss, Kuzyomin who once said:

It's the law of the jungle here, fellows. But even here you can live. The first to go is the guy who licks out bowls, puts his faith in the infirmary, or squeals to the screws.³

Living conditions in the Stalinist labour camp in which Shukhov is imprisoned are nearly intolerable, harsh, illustrating a world that has no tolerance for independence. Mattresses do not have sheets; prisoners eat only two hundred grams of bread per meal; and guards force prisoners for body searches at temperatures of forty below zero.

So they had to stand there in their bare feet for the frisk. And now, in the freezing cold, the guards made 'em take off just one of their boots and they pointed at the one they wanted. "Come on, take off your right boot! And you there, take off the left one"! So they had to hop around on one leg and turn 'em upside down and shake out their foot-cloths to show they didn't have a knife.⁴

Camp prisoners depend almost totally on each other's productivity and altruism, even for the most basic human needs. The dehumanizing atmosphere of the gulag ironically forces prisoners to discover means to retain their individuality while conforming to the harsh rules, spoken and unspoken, of the camp. So, the present paper acquaints his readers with a seemingly hopeless situation in that man-made hell⁵ and then introduces them with a character that struggles fiercely to maintain his individuality and serves as a powerful reminder of the resilience of the human spirit.

"They're taking our undershirts away...."

That's life in the camp. Shukhov had gotten used to it.⁶

The entire novel takes place in a span of one day, from dawn till dusk. This particular period represents the other 364 days of trial and tribulation faced every year both by the protagonist, Shukhov, and the rest of the prison's inmates who were taken from their families, homes and lives, stripped of their dignity and banished to the harsh labour camps where they were to spend the rest of their days scraping out an existence and living day to day. The book has no chapters, so it is like the reader is spending his day with the protagonist. Through this day, he tells of the people, the life conditions, what things are to be done and what things are not to be done.... By starting the book with a description of reveille and concluding it at lights out, when the prisoners are checked a second time despite the cold night air, Solzhenitsyn creates a miniature, or small world that represents a larger reality. Within this single day, Shukhov experiences hope and frustration, joy and despair, friendship and inhumanity, the embarrassment of scraping a secret hole in his mattress to store a loaf of bread and the spiritual satisfaction of sharing a cookie with one even less fortunate.⁷ His thoughts wander to other days and years, imparting to the reader a sense of continuity well beyond this particular day. However, between sunrise and bedtime Shukhov, his fellow members of Gang 104⁸ and all the inhabitants of the Stalinist labour camp experience the same array of emotions as they do every other day of the year and every other day of their sentences.

The labour camp presents not one but several terrible situations in which Shukhov must overcome daily circumstances, which only a person living in a prison camp would know how

to survive. But all through, the will to survive remains strong in Shukhov despite being harsh conditions of everyday life in the prison camp. For example, to earn money or extra food, he performs services for other inmates—everything from keeping a place in a long line to making shoes and slippers with a handmade knife.⁹ As a member of Gang 104, he works hard to help the group earn enough points to merit extra bread at the end of the day. Unlike Captain Buinovsky, he avoids provoking warders and guards by protesting maltreatment. Instead, he cleverly finds ways to dodge them altogether, as he does when assigned to scrub a floor. To maintain his psychological well-being, he does not dwell tremendously on the injustice that landed him in prison. In addition, he accepts the fact and adapted himself to survive in that prison camp so that exile could follow his release from prison.

Shukhov lives day by day; adaptability is the only way he can survive in the camps. The biting wind, jagged wire, frigid climate, watery soup, insufficient clothing, insufficient food and insufficient bedding in a remote arctic setting are just the beginning. They have nothing else. Work on a building is only called off if the temperature goes lower than 42 degrees below zero.

Shukhov gave a hopeful sidelong glance at the milk-white tube. If it were down to forty-two below zero they were not supposed to be marched out of work. But today the thermometer wasn't pushing forty or anything like it.¹⁰

Men are given insufficient tools and supplies but are expected under threat to complete the building process in record time. However, it is more than all the above. Rigid restrictions limiting contact with the outside world isolate them from their family and friends. Punishment for minor infractions imperils their well-being. Books are forbidden. Meanwhile, sadistic overseers like Volkovoi sometimes beat the prisoners for no reason at all. But in spite of all this, he wakes up early, eats three crummy meals, works in sub-zero weather until sundown, steals a few precious moments for himself at the end of the day, and goes to sleep happy.

The labour camp also attacks its prisoners' physical and spiritual dignity. By replacing prisoners' names with officialistic combinations of letters and numbers, the camp erases all traces of individuality. For example, the camp guards refer to Shukhov as 'S-854'.¹¹ This elimination of names represents the bureaucratic destruction of individual personalities.

Shukhov does not passively accept this attempt to dehumanize him. He shows that the way to maintain human dignity is not through outward rebellion but through developing a personal belief system. At meal time, no matter how hungry he is, he insists on removing his cap

before eating – however cold it was, he would never eat with it on.¹² This practice, a holdover from his upbringing, gives Shukhov a sense that he is behaving in a civilized manner. His determination on his own dignity amounts to an underground declaration of war against the state that imprisons him.

The laws and punishment within the labour camp are as unjust as those outside the camp. Shukhov gets into trouble and is threatened with three days in the hole not for any active wrongdoing but simply for being ill. Similarly, Buynovsky receives ten days in the hole for trying to bundle up against the cold with a flannel vest. Neither Shukhov's illness nor Buynovsky's attempt to stay warm harm anyone, but the camp treats both as deep violations of the law, worthy of severe punishment. Such harsh retribution for such small offenses is absurd, and the heaping of more punishment upon men already locked into long, hard prison sentences seems like nothing more than a cruel exercising of power by Soviet officials.

Is survival the only and most important goal, or are there limits to what a person can and should do to stay alive? Solzhenitsyn concludes that it is the duty of a human being not to resign and give up the struggle for survival. Therefore, Shukhov adapted all the qualities necessary to survive: he works for himself and for his comrades, but not for the authorities; he does not rely on outside help, but on his own skill and craftiness; he is used to obeying sensible orders; he has faith, but it is a faith designed to help him cope with the realities of this life, not one which exhausts itself in dogmatic theological debate. Ivan believes in the strength and the dignity of the simple Russian worker and peasant without being a stern Communist. He is, with some lapses, a compassionate human being who looks at his fellow prisoners with sympathy and understanding. Most of them appreciate this attitude and treat him with the same respect

Overall, perseverance is largely a mental thing in the prison camp. Having the will to survive, maintaining a sense of self and a sense of pride, refusing to let go of the past entirely, and refusing to give up hope are all key elements to successfully persevering. Survival is more about mental and spiritual strength than about physical strength. Existence without dignity is worthless — in fact, loss of human dignity will also diminish the will and the capacity to survive. Survival is a task which needs Shukhov's constant, simple-minded attention. Abstractions, esoteric discussions on religion or on art are irrelevant and counter-productive. Caesar Markovich can survive only as long as his packages arrive. The Captain, if he survives solitary confinement, will have to give up his unrealistic ideas about communism and his overbearing manner if he wants to live. Alyosha the Baptist is, by the very nature of

his faith, more interested in an afterlife than he is in physical survival during this lifetime. Clearly, Fetyukov and most of the informers will not live long.

Like anybody who's been in a highly structured and disciplined environment for a long time, Shukhov has developed his own individualized way of living day to day, bending the rules, avoiding punishment, and making life a little more bearable under the circumstances. Temperatures are commonly well below zero and the food is barely nutritional enough to keep the prisoners alive, but Shukhov has adapted well enough to know how to stay warm and make the most out of his meals:

The mush they were giving out today wasn't bad. It was the best kind, made of oats. It didn't come very often. It was usually *magara* twice a day, or flour mixed with water. These oats were more filling and that's what counted.

The amount of oats Shukhov fed to horses when he was a boy, and he never thought he'd long for a handful himself one day!¹³

What must a man or a woman do to get out of such a camp alive? Is survival the only and most important goal, or are there limits to what a person can and should do to stay alive? Is religious faith necessary or adaptability for survival?

Life in the camp where Shukhov is prisoned is all about *survival of the fittest* at its most brutal. Every day is a struggle, but Ivan never grouses or causes problems. He accepts everything camp life throws at him and triumphs. It's law of the jungle for Shukhov and for the people in the camp. Competition for resources is ruthless. Prisoners have to compete for everything – for food, warmth, decent work assignments, rewards, etc. They even compete for cigarette butts.

The prisoners' endurance shows how the Soviet regime makes private events public in order to exercise control over individuals. The inmates have no space to call their own, and their every move is monitored. At one point, the commander decrees that even a walk to the latrine cannot be made alone; even this has become a public event. Prisoners are no longer private individuals, but rather symbols in a public system. The state's elimination of privacy is not totally successful, however. The prisoners cling to their private worlds at all costs: Alyoshka latches on to his faith; Tsezar to his care packages; and Shukhov to his precious spoon. In an official and dehumanizing environment, each manages to keep one foot in his own private world, thereby preserving his humanity. Body searches that would be humiliating in the best of climates are physically torturous in temperatures of forty degrees below zero. Wearing ratty prison clothes would be degrading enough for the inmates even in summer, but wearing

them in the biting Siberian winter makes constant suffering a part of their prison sentence. Not only does Shukhov have to concentrate on avoiding punishment at the hands of the enforcers of the camp's often absurd regulations, but he also has to protect himself from the cold.

Solzhenitsyn's constant emphasis on the freezing cold reminds us that Shukhov is not only a political prisoner but a prisoner of nature as well. No one ever considers trying to escape from the camp, for the obvious reason that the intense weather would cause a quick death. The combination of the hard camp life and the forbidding weather creates the sense of adaptability as it seems that the whole universe is against Shukhov and his fellow inmates—their lives are hindered by both humans and the nature. This sense of oppression highlights the anguish of the human condition and in return imparts the lesson of adaptability.

But is survival the only and most important goal, or are there limits to what a person can and should do to stay alive? Solzhenitsyn concludes that it is the duty of a human being not to resign and give up the struggle for survival. Therefore, Shukhov adapted all the qualities necessary to survive: he works for himself and for his comrades, but not for the authorities; he does not rely on outside help, but on his own skill and craftiness; he is used to obeying sensible orders; he has faith, but it is a faith designed to help him cope with the realities of this life, not one which exhausts itself in dogmatic theological debate. He believes in the strength and the dignity of the simple Russian worker and peasant without being a stern Communist. He is, with some lapses, a compassionate human being who looks at his fellow prisoners with sympathy and understanding. Most of them appreciate this attitude and treat him with the same respect.

On this particular day, Shukhov's squad is forced to work construction; the novel describes how well Shukhov has improved his masonry skills as he expertly lays blocks and mortar building a wall for a building that will be used to hold future prisoners.

He was hard at work now. Once he ironed out the snags left by the guy who'd worked here before and laid a couple of rows of his own, it'd be easy going. But right now he had to watch things like a hawk.¹⁴

Overall, adaptability is largely a mental thing in the prison camp. Having the will to survive, maintaining a sense of self and a sense of pride, refusing to let go of the past entirely, and refusing to give up hope are all key elements to the optimistic attitude of adaptability and perseverance. But his fierce devotion to work is a contributing factor to both his hard-won pride and survival skills. The adaptability in him makes him to work with purpose and

professionalism that is how he sees his world and himself most clearly. For example, when Shukhov works on a brick wall, he focuses on it as if he owned every inch of it:

He was doing a good job and he was fast, but his mind wasn't on it. In his mind, he could see the wall under the ice, the outside wall of the power plant that was two bricks thick. He didn't know the man who'd worked on it in his place before. But that guy sure didn't know his job. He'd messed it up. Shukhov was now getting used to the wall like it was his own.¹⁵

The remarkable thing about the life of the protagonist is that before his imprisonment he was a soldier and even before that he was a teacher but the circumstances lead him towards a new world – the world that exposes the horrors of Soviet gulags:

In Shukhov's home village there were no stone houses, only wooden shacks. And the school was built of the logs too—they got as much wood as they liked from the forest. But now in the camp they had to do a bricklayer's job. So, okay, he did.¹⁶

Therefore, it was the adaptability and resilience of the human spirit in the face of a dehumanizing environment that made him to learn tolerance and resilience for independence. Although he was a slave, he was still the king of his little area of the world. In a way, the novel presents a terrible situation in which Shukhov must innate adaptability to overcome daily circumstances and get observed into it:

..... Shukhov never made a mistake. His bricks were always right in line. If one of them was broken or had a fault, Shukhov spotted it right off the bat and found the place on the wall where it would fit.¹⁷

A contented Shukhov explains why he rejects organized religion. He compares prayers to the complaints which the prisoners are allowed to put into boxes set up for this purpose in the camp. Either there is no answer, or they come back marked "Rejected".¹⁸ When he confronts Alyosha with the cruel facts of worldly corrupt priests, the young man only winces. There is very little he can respond with, except to say that the Baptist church is less corrupt than the Russian Orthodox Church. Alyosha's final argument — that his imprisonment is cause for rejoicing because it gives him a chance to contemplate and strengthen his faith — is met with a resigned silence by Shukhov. What he wants is an explanation for his being imprisoned. Alyosha can take solace in the fact that he is a martyr for his faith, but Shukhov is here, in the prison camp, because Russia was not prepared for World War II in 1941. The country sent him to the front lines ill-equipped, to be taken prisoner by superior German forces, and then

punished him for that. For Shukhov, religion provides no satisfactory answers for such anguished questions as “Why am I here?” and “Was it my fault”?¹⁹

An important aspect of the Siberian Work Camp that the novel describes is that the inmates have been convicted of activities that do not seem unlawful. Gopchik was imprisoned for taking milk to freedom fighters that were hiding in the woods; Shukhov was arrested by Germans and then falsely accused by the Russians of being a spy and Tyurin was punished simply for being the son of a rich peasant father—a social class that Stalin vowed to remove. We do not know much about the crimes of their fellow inmates, but none of them appears to be a terrible criminal. The very fact of their awful existence in the camp is rooted in the abuse of power and authority. The guards, wardens and other officials act as tyrannical power over the prisoners, but they too are oppressed by the power of the Soviet Union under Stalin’s regime who dictates their lives. Driven by their sense of power and authority, they create a laundry list of absurd rules that actually hamper the prisoners’ ability to survive and function within the Soviet ideal. But whether the Soviet government has enforced unfair laws or simply made false charges, the inmates’ back-breaking labour in sub-zero temperatures is appallingly unjust punishment.

The final paragraphs of this short novel are the most memorable ones. After encountering the initial horror at the in humane conditions of life in the gulag, the reader gradually begins to see Shukhov’s day through the eyes of a man who has become used too much of this horror and, unlike the reader, is no longer angry, or even dejected, about his condition. Such emotions would be a waste of time and would detract from his efforts to survive and, if possible, to improve his lot. Thus, Shukhov takes most of the outrages of camp life for granted; he is an ordinary example of the type of individual who spent their days in the gulag. What emerges from these ordinary individuals is the strength and will to survive and at the end of the day, a day that millions of others spent just like Shukhov, still find the courage to conclude ‘almost a good day’.²⁰

Back in his bunk, reflecting on the day’s adventures, he is at peace with his actions and their consequences. As he falls asleep, he recounts the triumphs of this day:

They hadn’t put him in the cooler. The gang had not been chased out to work in the Socialist Community Development. He’d finagled an extra bowl of mush at noon. The boss had gotten them good rates for their work. He’d felt good making that wall. They hadn’t found that piece of steel in the frisk Caesar had paid him off in the evening. He’d bought some tobacco. And he’d gotten over that sickness.²¹

Solzhenitsyn describes only a single day of Shukhov's life because his one-day plot emphasizes the fact that Shukhov's days belong to the Soviet government rather than to Shukhov himself. A day for a free citizen may be just a unit of time in the flow of life. But a day for Shukhov is part of his sentence, and thus has a powerful political significance. His day is not planned out according to his individual desires and whims, like the lives of many novelistic protagonists. Rather, his day is strictly dictated from above, by the high Soviet powers that be. By focusing on one governmentally regulated day in the sentence of a political prisoner, Solzhenitsyn shows the weariness and monotony of the life of a labour camp jailbird.

The focus on the events of a single day corresponds to the way Shukhov lives his life in camp. As he drifts off into sleep, he recalls that there are 3,653 days in his sentence; the extra three are due to leap years. Solzhenitsyn seems to suggest he will be less conflicted serving the remaining days in his sentence now that he has found more value in nurturing his spiritual needs than those of his body alone.

In the end, I may conclude that anyone who reads this book is guaranteed to never say again, "I'm having a bad day". The courage and faith of Shukhov is but an example of the many who were plunged into this horrific life. May God bless them all!

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