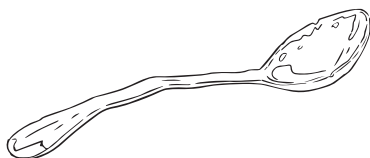


WORLDVIEW GUIDE

ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF IVAN

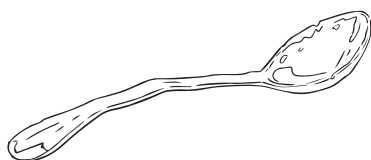
DENISOVICH



Stephen Rippon

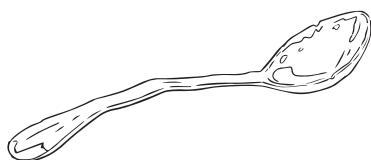
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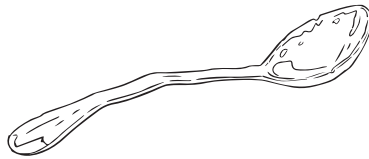


INTRODUCTION

In 1961, a Russian schoolteacher submitted a novel based on his experience in the Gulags to Aleksandr Tvardovsky, editor of *Novy Mir*. Tvardovsky “took the manuscript home in the evening, changed into his lounging robe, propped himself up with pillows.... After having read just two or three pages, he got up, put on his office clothes, and resumed his reading. He was, he knew, in the presence of a literary masterpiece, and only dignified attire was fitting for the occasion.”¹

Thus was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn discovered as a writer. His work would eventually contribute to the Soviet Union’s collapse.

1. This account is from Edward E. Ericson, Jr. and Alexis Klimoff, *The Soul and Barbed Wire: An Introduction to Solzhenitsyn* (Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2008), 18-19.



WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

What makes this novel so remarkable? Historically, the novel is important as an exposé of the injustice and suffering in the Soviet Gulag system. Solzhenitsyn's work, starting with *Ivan Denisovich*, is credited with helping to bring about the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Solzhenitsyn scholars Edward E. Ericson, Jr. and Daniel J. Mahoney write in their introduction to *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*, "Today most informed observers appreciate the central role that Solzhenitsyn placed in the defeat of communism. More than any other figure in the twentieth century, he exposed the ideological 'lie' at the heart of Communist totalitarianism."²³

But what accounts for the novel's historical impact, and what makes it worth reading today long after the fall of

23. Edward E. Ericson and Daniel J. Mahoney, Introduction to *The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings 1947-2005*, ed. Edward E. Ericson, Jr., and Daniel J. Mahoney (Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2006), xxxix.

the Soviet Union? *Ivan Denisovich* succeeds on many levels. First, Solzhenitsyn tells a fascinating story of survival. Second, the novel is a great work of art in keeping with the classical ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty. Finally, *Ivan Denisovich* is a deeply Christian work that reflects a biblical theology of creation, fall, and redemption.

On a basic level, the story succeeds as a tale of human survival. Readers familiar with *Robinson Crusoe* may remember the pleasure of learning how Crusoe can do so much on his island with so little left from the shipwreck. A similar principle enlivens this novel. How does Shukhov manage to survive amidst harsh conditions?

Shukhov has learned much about survival over his eight years in prison. For example, as Shukhov washes a floor underfoot of prison administrators who are idly talking, he reflects, “There are two ends to a stick, and there’s more than one way of working. If it’s for human beings—make sure and do it properly. If it’s for the big man—just make it look good. Any other way, we’d all have turned our toes up long ago, that’s for sure” (14). At breakfast, Shukhov muses on another rule of survival: “food swallowed in a hurry is food wasted, you feel no fuller and it does nothing for you” (26).

One key to survival is companionship. There is a tension in the novel between the need to look out for one’s own interests—“It’s dog eat dog here” (75)—and the way the prisoners take care of each other. The work gang is “like a big family. That’s what a work gang is—a family” (88). The