One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich

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Extract

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As usual, at five o'clock that morning reveille was sounded by the blows of a hammer on a length of rail hanging up near the staff quarters. The intermittent sounds barely penetrated the window-panes on which the frost lay two fingers thick, and they ended almost as soon as they'd begun. It was cold outside, and the camp-guard was reluctant to go on beating out the reveille for long.

The clanging ceased, but everything outside still looked like the middle of the night when Ivan Denisovich Shukhov got up to go to the bucket. It was pitch dark except for the yellow light cast on the window by three lamps – two in the outer zone, one inside the camp itself.

And no one came to unbolt the barrack-hut door; there was no sound of the barrack-orderlies pushing a pole into place to lift the barrel of nightsoil and carry it out.

Shukhov never overslept reveille. He always got up at once, for the next ninety minutes, until they assembled for work, belonged to him, not to the authorities, and any old-timer could always earn a bit – by sewing a pair

of over-mittens for someone out of old sleeve lining; or bringing some rich lag in the team his dry valenki[1] – right up to his bunk, so that he wouldn't have to stumble barefoot round the heap of boots looking for his own pair; or going the rounds of the store-huts, offering to be of service, sweeping up this or fetching that; or going to the mess-hall to collect bowls from the tables and bring them stacked to the dishwashers – you're sure to be given something to eat there, though there were plenty of others at that game, more than plenty – and, what's worse, if you found a bowl with something left in it you could hardly resist licking it out. But Shukhov had never forgotten the words of his first team-leader, Kuziomin – a hard-bitten prisoner who had already been in for twelve years by 1943 – who told the newcomers, just in from the front, as they sat beside a fire in a desolate cutting in the forest:

'Here, lads, we live by the law of the taiga. But even here people manage to live. D'you know who are the ones the camps finish off? Those who lick other men's left-overs, those who set store by the doctors, and those who peach on their mates.'

As for peachers, he was wrong there. Those people were sure to get through camp all right. Only, they were saving their own skin at the expense of other people's blood.

Shukhov always arose at reveille. But this day he didn't. He had felt queer the evening before, feverish,

1 Knee-length felt boots for winter wear.

with pains all over his body. He hadn't been able to get warm all through the night. Even in his sleep he had felt at one moment that he was getting seriously ill, at another that he was getting better. He had longed for the morning not to come.

But the morning came as usual.

Anyway, it wasn't surprising that he'd felt cold in the night. That ice on the window-panes! And the white cobwebs of hoar-frost all along the huge hut where the walls joined the ceiling!

He didn't get up. He lay there in his bunk on the top tier, his head buried in a blanket and a coat, his two feet stuffed into one sleeve, with the end tucked under, of his wadded jacket. He couldn't see, but his ears told him everything going on in the barrack-room and especially in the corner his team occupied. He heard the heavy tread of the orderlies carrying one of the big barrels of nightsoil along the passage outside. A light job, that was considered, a job for the infirm, but just you try and carry out the muck without spilling any. He heard some of the 75th slamming bunches of boots on to the floor from the drying-shed. Now their own lads were doing it (it was their own team's turn, too, to dry valenki). Tiurin, the team-leader, and his deputy Pavlo put on their valenki without a word but he heard their bunks creaking. Now Pavlo would be going off to the bread-stores and Tiurin to the staff quarters to see the P.P.D.[1]

Ah, but not simply to report as usual to the authorities

1 Production Planning Department.

who distributed the daily assignments. Shukhov remembered that this morning his fate hung in the balance: they wanted to shift the 104th from the building-shops to a new site, the 'Socialist Way of Life' settlement. It lay in open country covered with snow-drifts, and before anything else could be done there they would have to dig pits and put up posts and attach barbed wire to them. Wire themselves in, so that they wouldn't run away. Only then would they start building.

There wouldn't be a warm corner for a whole month. Not a dog-kennel. And fires were out of the question. Where was the firewood to come from? Warm up with the work, that was your only salvation.

No wonder the team-leader looked so worried, that was his responsibility – to elbow some other team, some bunch of clod-hoppers, into the assignment instead of the 104th. Of course he wouldn't get the authorities to agree if he turned up empty-handed. He'd have to take a pound of pork-fat to the senior official there, if not a couple of pounds.

There's never any harm in trying, so why not have a go at the sick-bay and get a few days off if you can? After all, he did feel as though every limb was out of joint.

Then Shukhov wondered which of the camp-guards was on duty that morning. It was 'One-and-a-half' Ivan's turn, he recalled. Ivan was a thin, weedy, dark-eyed sergeant. At first sight he looked a real terror, but when you got to know him he turned out to be the most good-natured of the guards on duty: he didn't put you in

the lock-up, he didn't haul you off before the authorities. So Shukhov decided he could lie in his bunk a little longer, at least while Hut 9 was at the mess-hall.

The whole four-bunk frame began to shake and sway. Two of its occupants were getting up simultaneously: Shukhov's top-tier neighbour, Alyosha the Baptist, and Buinovsky, the ex-naval captain down below.

The orderlies, after removing both the barrels of night-soil, began to quarrel about which of them should go for hot water. They quarrelled naggingly, like old women.

'Hey you, spluttering like a couple of squibs!' bellowed the electric welder in the 20th team. 'Make it up.' He flung a boot at them.

The boot thudded against a post. The squabbling stopped.

In the adjacent team the deputy team-leader growled quietly:

'Vasily Fyodorovich, they've cheated us again at the supply-hatch, the slimy rats: they should have given us four nine-hundred gram loaves and I've only got three. Who's to go short?'

He kept his voice down, but of course everyone in the team heard him and waited fearfully to learn who would be losing a slice of bread that evening.

Shukhov went on lying on his sawdust mattress, as hard as a board from long wear. If only it could be one thing or the other: let him fall into a real fever or let his aching joints ease up.

Meanwhile Alyosha was murmuring his prayers and

Buinovsky had returned from the latrines, announcing to no one in particular but with a sort of malicious glee:

'Well, sailors, grit your teeth. It's thirty below, for sure.'

Shukhov decided to report sick.

At that very moment his blanket and jacket were imperiously jerked off him. He flung his coat away from his face and sat up. Looking up at him, his head level with the top bunk, was the lean figure of The Tartar.

So the fellow was on duty out of turn and had stolen up.

'S 854', The Tartar read from the white strip that had been stitched to the back of his black jacket. 'Three days' penalty with work.'

The moment they heard that peculiar choking voice of his, everyone who wasn't up yet in the whole dimly-lit hut, where two hundred men slept in bug-ridden bunks, stirred to life and began hurriedly dressing.

'What for, citizen[1] chief?' asked Shukhov with more chagrin than he felt in his voice.

With work – that wasn't half so bad. They gave you hot food and you had no time to start thinking. Real lock-up was when you were kept back from work.

'Failing to get up at reveille. Follow me to the camp commandant's office,' said The Tartar lazily.

His crumpled, hairless face was imperturbable. He turned, looking round for another victim, but now

1 Prisoners were not allowed to use the word comrade.

everybody, in dim corners and under the lights, in upper bunks and lower, had thrust their legs into their black wadded trousers, or, already dressed, had wrapped their coats round them and hurried to the door to get out of the way until The Tartar had left.

Had Shukhov been punished for something he deserved he wouldn't have felt so resentful. What hurt him was that he was always one of the first to be up. But he knew he couldn't plead with The Tartar. And, protesting merely for the sake of form, he hitched up his trousers (a bedraggled scrap of cloth had been sewn on them, just above the left knee, with a faded black number), slipped on his jacket (here the same digits appeared twice – on the chest and on the back), fished his valenki from the heap on the floor, put his hat on (with his number on a patch of cloth at the front), and followed The Tartar out of the barrack-room.

The whole 104th saw him go, but no one said a word: what was the use, and anyway what could they say? The team-leader might have tried something, but he wasn't there. And Shukhov said nothing to anyone. He didn't want to irritate The Tartar. Anyway he could rely on his mates to keep his breakfast for him.

The two men left the hut. The cold made Shukhov gasp.

Two powerful searchlights swept the camp from the farthest watch-towers. The border-lights, as well as those inside the camp, were on. There were so many of them that they outshone the stars.

With the snow creaking under their boots, the

prisoners hurried away, each on his own business, some to the parcels office, some to hand in cereals to be cooked in the 'individual' kitchen. All kept their heads down, buried in their buttoned-up coats, and all were chilled to the bone, not so much from the actual cold as from the prospect of having to spend the whole day in it. But The Tartar in his old army coat with the greasy blue tabs walked at a steady pace, as though the cold meant nothing to him.

They walked past the high wooden fence round the lock-up, the only brick building in the camp; past the barbed wire that protected the camp bakery from the prisoners; past the corner of the staff quarters where the length of frosted rail hung on thick strands of wire; past another pole with a thermometer hanging to it (in a sheltered spot, so that the registered temperature shouldn't drop too low). Shukhov looked hopefully out of the corner of an eye at the milk-white tube: if it had shown −41° they ought not to be sent out to work. But today it was nowhere near −41°.

They walked into the staff quarters and The Tartar led him straight to the guard-room; and Shukhov realized, as he had guessed on the way there, that he wasn't being sent to the lock-up at all – it was simply that the guardroom floor needed scrubbing. The Tartar told him he was going to let him off, and ordered him to scrub.

Scrubbing the guard-room floor had been the job of a special prisoner who wasn't sent to work outside the camp – a staff orderly. The fellow had long ago made himself at home in the staff quarters; he had access

to the offices of the camp commandant, the man in charge of discipline, and the security officer (the Father Confessor, they called him). When working for them he sometimes heard things that even the guards didn't know, and after a time he got uppish, and came to consider scrubbing the floor for rank-and-file camp-guards a bit beneath him. Having sent for him once or twice the guards discovered what was in the wind, and began to pick on other prisoners for the floor-scrubbing.

In the guard-room the stove was throwing out a fierce heat. Two guards in grubby tunics were playing draughts, and a third, who had not bothered to remove his sheepskin and valenki, lay snoring on a narrow bench. In one corner of the room stood an empty pail with a rag inside.

Shukhov was delighted. He thanked The Tartar for letting him off and said: 'From now on I'll never get up late again.'

The rule in this place was a simple one: when you'd finished you left. And now that he'd been given work to do, Shukhov's aches and pains seemed to have gone. He picked up the pail and, bare-handed – in his hurry he'd forgotten to take his mittens from under his pillow – went to the well.

Several of the team-leaders who were on their way to the P.P.D. had gathered near the pole with the thermometer, and one of the younger ones, a former Hero of the Soviet Union, shinned up it and wiped the instrument.

The others shouted advice from below:

'See you don't breathe on it. It'll put up the temperature.'

'Put it up? Not f . . . g likely. *My* breath won't have any effect.'

Tiurin of the 104th – Shukhov's team – was not among them. Shukhov put down the pail, tucked his hands into his sleeves and watched with interest.

The man up the pole shouted hoarsely:

'Twenty-seven and a half. Not a bloody bit more.'

And, taking another look to be sure, slid down.

'Oh, it's cock-eyed. It always lies,' someone said. 'D'you think they'd ever hang one up that gave the true temperature?'

The team-leaders scattered. Shukhov ran to the well. The frost was trying to nip his ears under his ear-flaps, which he had lowered but not tied.

The top of the well was so thickly coated with ice that he only just managed to slip the bucket into the hole. The rope hung stiff as a ramrod.

With numb hands he carried the streaming bucket back to the guard-room and plunged his hands into the water. It felt warm.

The Tartar was no longer there. The guards – there were four now – stood in a group. They'd given up their draughts and their kip and were arguing about how much millet they were going to get in January (food was in short supply at the settlement, and although rationing had long since come to an end certain articles were sold to them, at a discount, which were not available to the civilian inhabitants).