

One day in the life of ivan denisovich: characters and their survival methods

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Depending on situations, one must decide to either conform to others' ideas or develop his own opinions on how to deal with that situation. Most of us choose to go with the flow and conform. Occasionally, however, one person won't agree with the common idea and relies on his own opinion. Now, consider a situation in which life and death are in the balance of this choice. Which is the better decision, conforming or acting independently? In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Shukov has developed his own ideas of survival rather than conforming to the other prisoners' methods in the Gulag. Shukov makes the most out of each day, snatching and conserving food, working diligently, and being forceful around others when necessary. For example, he saves his ration of bread for as long as he can before and during the march to work rather than consume it instantly. As a result, he can fend off hunger for a longer period of time. Additionally, Shukov works to the best of his ability in laying bricks. He even runs back to the wall to make sure his work is perfectly level, even at the risk of being caught and punished. Finally, he knows when to be physically forceful, pushing his way into dinner and snatching an extra tray or ration of food. In sum, he has many other methods that he uses in order to survive, but he also looks at other prisoners', sometimes in disdain.

Many prisoners in the Gulag have their own ideas of how to survive, and Shukov never fails to observe them. For instance, upon visiting the camp's assistant doctor, Nikolay, he notes how Nikolay, also a prisoner, clings to his highly fortunate job indoors. He is a poet, not a doctor, but does anything to please officials just to stay warm. In another, more disdainful example,

Fetyukov has chosen to scrounge and beg in order to survive, an idea that Shukov considers beneath his dignity. Fetyukov chooses to whine for extra food and cigarettes rather than keep his dignity. Finally, Alyosha's outlook on his imprisonment seems almost too optimistic in Shukov's eyes. The Baptist considers his imprisonment a time to meditate on God and pray about his soul. Furthermore, he does favors for other prisoners without expecting anything in return. Shukov isn't quite sure what to make of Alyosha's perspective, perhaps placing it under naiveté, but learns to label his ideas and methods acceptable for survival. Shukov doesn't judge all of his comrades' methods in a negative manner, but learns to understand what works and doesn't work in favor of his survival as each day passes.

In Shukov's case, developing his independent ideas rather than conforming ensured his survival. He certainly shared some ideas with his comrades, but at the same time he knew that taking both independent and perspicacious action would save his life. Taking action upon our independent ideas isn't called for in every situation, but more often than not, thinking independently is the better of the two choices.