Professor David Peimer | Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Part 1: How Does His Voice Echo Today?

– And hi to everybody everywhere. Hope everyone is well, and can enjoy the summer. So today we're going to look at Solzhenitsyn, and you look at him today and next Saturday as well. And we made the small change, 'cause we already done two sessions on Moscow Art, theatre and Stanislavsky, and the influence that he had in actor training and rehearsals. It's taking a shift, but in a way, although contemporary, looking at Solzhenitsyn, or much more contemporary in a sense, second half of the 20th century really, Solzhenitsyn but so deeply imbued with the ideas that've we've been looking at already, in terms of the great Russian writers of Russian nationalism, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the idea of Russian identity, and the endless debate that Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, Gogol and the others that we've looked at, had around, you know, should Russia become more like Western Europe or not? And this idea of superior, inferior, constant hidden and not so hidden tension between the two in terms of identity, and in terms of influence either way. So it's this idea of Western Europe being superior, the Enlightenment, and then influencing partly at times the earlier writers, the 1860s Tolstoys, the Dostoevskys, and others. And Dostoevsky is within that overall paradigm of the greater questions of Russian identity, and of Russia and Western Europe. To assimilate or not to assimilate, or what to creatively take from each other or not, or to resist from each other. And I know that these debates have been, you know, we've spoken about these, a fair amount of looking at the other great writers from Russia. He, for me is part of it in a very contemporary way, but obviously, also is pushing in a whole different approach because he's post Second World War. So absolutely embedded in the Stalin and post Stalin era, up to our times right now, you know, dying in 2008. So I think that he captures in a way all of the main ideas from the past of Russian culture, literature, and history, and the contemporary. He is more than the bridge. I think he, well he is the bridge, but I think he points a way towards understanding something now in Russia, and perhaps the future. There's also something quite extraordinary about Solzhenitsyn's life.

Today I'm going to focus on something, a bit about the biography, and some of the extraordinary, quite remarkable experiences that this guy went through, and lived in a very long life, but a remarkable life. And the other thing is his understanding of literature and shall we say, a fictionalised history. How do you fictionalise historical events, dramatise, but in literature, in novels, and creative writing and so on. And I'm going to look primarily at Solzhenitsyn, his life, or aspects of his biography, together with the first great book, in my opinion, "A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich." Remarkable, just over 200 pages book. And that book, when I read it, obviously many years ago, university times, it had an extraordinary impact on me. So powerful, it was one of those few rare books, maybe half a dozen, that

one goes back to later in life. Elie Wiesel's "Night," Primo Levi, you know, "This Be a Man," and a couple of others, Beckett's "Godot," et cetera. There are certain books or works of literature that, for me, I have gone back to again and again, and that book, "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," I still remember the extreme impact it had when I first read it, and then when I read later "The Gulag Archipelago." So we're going to look today at something about his life, his bio, and "A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich." And then next week I'm, in the context of Russian identity. And then next week I'm going to look at "The Gulag Archipelago" in much more depth, you know, his magnum opus, really, and also, and how it has influenced so much of literature today. And secondly, I'm going to look at his complicated, to put it mildly, complex and controversial relationship with Jewish people in Russia, which is important to look at and important to acknowledge from his point of view, and from the point of view of his one book in particular, which focused on that.

Okay, these are some pictures here. Obviously we see him at the top. These are some pictures from his youth, and this is his, when he received, the one at the bottom middle, when he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was awarded it in 1970, and he was not allowed to go and collect it, 'cause he was told by the Soviet authorities, "If you go, we might not let you back in, and your family will suffer," et cetera. So, and he asked the Swedish embassy if they could give it to him in Moscow, at the embassy. And the Kremlin even stepped in to ask, and they said no. The Swedish said, "No, you have to come," because they didn't want to make this the beginning of a kind of capitulation to whatever other dictatorship there might be in the world, and rightly so. Anyway, he had to wait four years, when 1974 he could officially collect his Nobel Prize, four years after it was awarded. That's the bottom picture we see in the middle. This is a picture here of Solzhenitsyn. And I like this because it gives an array of the young Solzhenitsyn, or younger, and then of course, later in life, when he became, like so many of the Russian writers of the great tradition of that golden era of the Tolstoys, Dostoevskys, Gogol, of all these writers, Pushkin before them, that we've looked at. They become prophets, in inverted commas, prophets in Russia, almost. The position of the author, I think is quite different to it is in many Western cultures or English language cultures. You know, in France it's got a whole different connotation, in Germany, than it has, say, in England, perhaps America, South Africa and other countries that I know much more intimately. There is a sense in Russia of, they become at some point seen as semi-prophet or they take on the mantle of semi-prophet or seer, or, you know, semi-wise elder, something like that. And I think it's something which isn't just a naive, on the one hand it is naive romanticism. But on the other hand it's a hunger in a culture for those kind of wise, elderly figures, in a way. I remember Mandela tried to set up a council of elders, with Tutu and some others.

So it goes back to ancient times, obviously. We see this happening in the last, in the two pictures on the right. The younger one, you know, the much more angry, determined, fierce Solzhenitsyn on the left. This line from Solzhenitsyn is one that has echoed for me over my life. And I'm sure many others, you know, here today and everywhere in the world, in their own way, and how it is absolutely for me so prescient for today, in our times, as the darkening clouds of fascism, you know, start to hover everywhere, in the West. "Let the lie come into the world, let it even triumph, but not through me." It's not only the idea that I want to mention here that Solzhenitsyn is getting at, but it's his ability as a writer to put the idea creatively and artistically. It's written as a parable. It's written as a, almost a command, commandment. It's written with the echoes resonant almost of, of close to poetry. It's beautifully stated for me and unforgettable, you know. It's so many years since I first read it, but it burned into my youthful imagination, let's say. "But not through me." And it's such a distinction. And I think he tried as much as humanly possible, to live this. If I was to have one phrase to sum him up, it would be something like this. Whatever the price of truth is, whatever truth is, you know, he would fight for it, regardless of all the many shifts and changes that happened in his life. Okay, this is the major books, Nobel Prize that I mentioned, "A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," 1962. So let's think of it. The Second World War ends in '45, and this is published in '62, so 15 years after the war, he's writing. I'm going to come back to what happens after the Second World War, to Solzhenitsyn. "Cancer Ward," when he was in, he had, he was diagnosed with cancer and nearly died, managed to get there. We're going to come to that in his biography. That book, "The First Circle," "August 1914," prefiguring the Russian Revolution of 1917 to come. And then the great magnum opus, "The Gulag Archipelago," the English translation of '74, but he wrote it between '58 and '68. It's a three-volume masterpiece. And then the "Two Hundred Years Together," 2003, it's published in 2003 in English, that's his book on the relationship between Jewish people in Russia, and Russia, and Christian in Russia. It's literally about that, the 200 years together. And it's important not to just quote commentators on it, or others, but to actually look at what he's saying about that relationship, in it. And it's controversial, and we're going to look at it in much more depth next week, together with "The Gulag Archipelago." This is a picture here of after he was released from prison, on the top left, he was staying at Heinrich Boell in Germany, in West Germany, near, you know, and he was mixing mostly with West Germans here.

And this is in the '70s, when he is forced to leave Russia. And then at the bottom, he's much older here, of course, a much, a whole different age. So let me go back to here, and let's begin with a bit of the biography of, for me, this remarkable giant of a human being, the adversity and the sheer tough grit of this guy's life. He's born into a devout family of the Russian Orthodox Church. His parents are pretty devout believers. Quite young, he lost his faith in

Christianity, and became a believer in atheism and Marxism. So he was a committed communist or Marxist in those days. In later life, he became, let's call it, and critics and others have called him a philosophically-minded Russian Orthodox Christian. And I think that phrase does capture it, because it's not a naive, pure emotional belief. It's a philosophically thought-through belief in Russian Orthodoxy. His father was of Russian descent, and his mother of Ukrainian descent, and he saw Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, as part of one, the old Russian empire. And I know, I'm sure William and Trudy have gone into that in much more knowledgeable detail than I could ever, but all of it as part of one. So the fact that the, he has a mix of Ukrainian and Russian heritage from his parents would've been important, for him, in terms of understanding the whole of Russia. His father, his mother's father, had risen from peasant origins, post emancipation of the serfs, and to become a fairly wealthy landowner. So he is not born poor, but his father dies very young. In 1918, so this is only, let's go back here and remember. He born in 1918. 1918, in other words, he's just been born, his father is killed in a hunting accident as far as we can understand accurately. Solzhenitsyn was raised by his widowed mother in pretty tough circumstances, because there was no father. And what was happening to the property after the Russian Revolution was, I'm sure, a story that everybody knows. And of course, the time of the Russian Civil War. By 1930, the family property that the father had built up to reasonable wealth had been turned into a collective farm under the communists. World War II finds Solzhenitsyn is a captain in the Red Army, and he's part of the infantry. I mean, he's fighting on the front. He's twice decorated, and he's awarded the Order of the Red Star. He's highly decorated for bravery, in fighting in the Red Army, fighting against the Germans. So, you know, he's got this history coming. He's a committed Marxist in this. In February, 1944, he was serving in the Red Army in East Prussia, and he was arrested by SMERSH, which of course was the forerunner of the KGB. For what, for writing a couple of, let's call it semi-derogatory comments in a few private letters to a friend, about Stalin's running of the war.

Now, there must have been millions of soldiers. How many letters did they open? Was it only the officer class, was it not? Was it purely random, you know, in order to keep everybody, all the soldiers scared? Bottom line, his letters were opened, couple of, I suppose, questioning, semi-derogatory comments. Anyway, he's called in front of a complete trumped up tribunal. And in, to quote the tribunal's records, he was accused of founding a hostile anti-Soviet organisation, which is complete nonsense. It was a couple of letters. Extraordinary vagaries of life. A few letters dictates this guy's entire life. He becomes the giant of the 20th century that he became. Quite, for me, an extraordinary twist of fate, an extraordinary moment in a life, you know, where we look for moments in our lives where we can say, "This really changed me," or so-and-so, or that one, or whatever. This is literally, it's an external event. A few little

letters. He was taken to the infamous Lubyanka Prison in Moscow in 1945. From his cell, Solzhenitsyn later remembered again, this is the way he writes about something that is fact, not fiction. "Above the muzzle," this is '45, after the end of the Second World War. And of course everybody, you know, the main, the victors, the Allies are celebrating, London, New York, Moscow and so on. "Above the muzzle of our window, and from all the windows of all the Moscow prisons, we former soldiers, we former frontline soldiers, watched the Moscow heavens patterned with fireworks, crisscrossed with beams of searchlights, people rejoicing. We heard their sounds, could not see them. But there was no rejoicing in ourselves, no hugs, no kisses for us. That victory was not ours." It's not only the event, but for me it's the way of writing as a young man, you know, having that, becoming a captain, being awarded for bravery, et cetera, and then arrested. July, 1945 is when he was sentenced by a special council of the NKVD to eight years in a Siberian labour camp, for a couple of letters, as I said of his comments. And this was on average, a fairly normal sentence, eight years in a Siberian labour camp. He was in the work camps first, and then 1950, he was sent to a so-called special camp, for political prisoners in Kazakhstan. And there he worked as a miner, a bricklayer, and then graduated, you know, to put it in inverted commas, to becoming a factory foreman, which helps, of course, because slightly better conditions, slightly better food, and so on. This forms the basis of the "Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich." And it's these experiences, those eight years in the forced labour camps, where approximately, I think, one in seven or one in eight died, in these years before Stalin's death, post Second World War to Stalin's death. Then in 19, while there, in the camp, he had a tumour removed, and, but cancer was not diagnosed. So he's still young.

In 1953, his sentence ends. He's done the eight years. And Solzhenitsyn was then, after the sentence, he was sent to internal exile for life, at a village called Burluk in Kazakhstan. And his undiagnosed cancer spread, and he was finally permitted to be treated in a hospital. And they managed to treat the tumour. Whether luck or whether through treatment, who knows? The tumour went into remission. And those experiences became the basis of the novel "Cancer Ward." During his imprisonment and his exile, that's when he said he became what we are calling a philosophically minded Eastern Orthodox Christian. 1940, so five years before his arrest, the war is still raging, and just before Russia is brought into the war by the Nazis, he married Natalia. They had just over a year of married life. Then he had to go into the army, and then, he goes into the Gulag in 1945. They divorced in 1952, why? It was a year before his release. Because wives of gulag prisoners faced the loss of residency and work permits, most importantly, if they were the wife of a gulag, so-called political prisoner. So they divorced a year, she stayed faithful. They divorced a year before he was released. Then at the end of his internal exile in 1957, so he has four years of internal exile in

Kazakhstan, 1957, they're married again. I mean, if we try to imagine ourselves at a fairly young age, in our 20s and 30s, just living through this, it's quite an extraordinary thing to imagine. Anyway, they ended up divorcing for a second time in 1972, not, I mean, for obviously much more emotional marital reasons. In 1973, he married his second wife, also called Natalia, who was a mathematician, and they had three sons. After prison, what happens, and after exile, his Khrushchev speech, and I'm sure everybody knows, in 1956, the famous speech he gave to the Duma, or the secret speech, rather, where he criticised Stalin and the cult of the great leader. Solzhenitsyn was freed from exile and exonerated after Khrushchev's speech, brought back. And he taught in a school during the day, and at night, he was secretly writing. In his Nobel Prize speech in 1974, he wrote that, "Until 1961, I was convinced I would never see one line of mine in print, but also I scarcely dared allow any of my close acquaintances to read anything I had written." Terrified, if he has a close friend read anything, somebody will denounce them. Terrible system of utterly vicious and cruel, insidious system of denouncing. You know, you could denounce anybody, if you don't like the colour of their shirt, the colour of their hair, whatever, you know, the denouncing system. So hardly anybody ever read anything he'd written, never dreamed it would be published.

Then, quite extraordinary, this is the Khrushchev era, 1962, he's able to publish "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich." It's the only book he was officially allowed to publish in Russia up until the end, the fall of the Berlin Wall in '89, '90. Published in 1962, with the actual approval of Khrushchev himself, and Khrushchev went to a meeting, a special meeting, this is the level that a writer can cause, of the Politburo. And at the meeting, it's specially organised to discuss whether this 230-something-page book of Solzhenitsyn's should be allowed to be published and distributed in Russia. They have the meeting and they agree, at Khrushchev's pushing, to allow the publication. And Khrushchev added at the meeting, this is what he said. "There is a Stalinist in each of you. There's even a Stalinist in me. We must root out this evil." Extraordinary. Short number of years after the death of Stalin. The writer who's gone, he's gone through all this hell in the Siberian camps and so on. Now, the very, the leader of this terrible system reads the book, has a special meeting of the Politburo. "Right, we must exonerate him, call him a hero, publish his book." Not only that, and talk like this. The book sells out in Russia, becomes an instant hit, gets translated and becomes global, everywhere in the Western and English language world. During his time, now, this is fascinating. During Khrushchev's few years in power, this book, "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," was studied by millions of school kids in the old Soviet Union. I find that extraordinary, a brief window of hope, of perhaps dream, perhaps naive fantasy, romance, whatever. It's published, and millions of Soviet kids read it. And the book brought the, it's the only one of its kind, as far as I can find from the research, and Solzhenitsyn's

own research.

The book obviously brought the Soviet system of prison labour and the camps into the attention of the West, 'caused obviously a sensation in the old Soviet Union, as it did in the West, and everywhere. The publication of his story, it's an almost unheard of intervention or moment of freedom, of free discussion, of politics and literature coming together, of history, politics and literature intersecting in a moment in time, quite an, and that for me is an amazing moment. And he is absolutely at the centre, and it's all because of a couple of letters he wrote in 1945 to a couple of friends. Khrushchev is then ousted from power in 1964. And of course that period, I'm not even going to call it liberalisation, but of slight openness perhaps, ends. He's unsuccessful in getting "Cancer Ward," his novel, published in the Soviet Union. Required the approval of the Soviet Union of Writers. And of course it was denied by them. They were all the lackeys of the system. After Khrushchev, in 1964, the cultural climate becomes very repressive again, and he was declared a non-person. So he has a couple of years. He's a hero, he's a great literary figure. All goes, non-person, officially. But 1965, the KGB had seized most of his papers, his books, and the beginning of the harassment from '65, almost to the end of communism at '89, '90, begins by the KGB. He continues to write secretly. "The Gulag Archipelago" took 10 years, as I mentioned, you know, that he was writing, until '68, basically. And interestingly, this is a fascinating twist of history. "The Gulag Archipelago" was finished in typescript in hiding, at a friend of his home in Soviet-ruled Estonia at the time. The guy, who was a minister of education, had been a lawyer when he was in prison in the late '40s, and they had met in the prison in Moscow. A guy called Arnold Susi was an Estonian lawyer. They meet in the prison. Becomes the minister of education of Estonia, and becomes his friend. And he smuggles the book to this guy, who holds it, and then gets it out to be published in the West. Otherwise, "The Gulag Archipelago," who knows what would've happened. In 1969, he's expelled from the Union of Writers, the Soviet Union of Writers. 1970, as I said, he gets the Nobel Prize. "The Gulag Archipelago" has sold over 30 million copies, in 35 languages, three volumes, and of course it's about the Soviet camp system, the prison camp system. But it's fascinating, because different to this fictionalised history approach of "A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," he interviewed and drew on the testimony of over 256 former prisoners, and his own research to the history of the Russian penal system. And I'm going to look at that and I'm going to compare it next week to Foucault, who talks about the French penal system in "Madness and Civilization," you know, how madness was redefined over centuries in France, you know, went from being in prison, to asylum, to a lunatic asylum, et cetera, et cetera, to rehab places and so on.

So Foucault looks at it more from a sociological point of view, and philosophical, where Solzhenitsyn is more from an historical and

literary point of view. But it's all in that book. And of course, he looks at it from the beginning of the prison system, beginning with the founding of the communist regime with Lenin, and Lenin having the responsibility for the prisons, for in procedures of interrogation, prisoner transport, camp culture, prisoner uprisings, revolts, how internal exile was set up, all these ideas originating with the beginning of the Russians, but obviously taking from the tsar and others before. He called the book a literary and political work. And he never claimed to be trying to be so accurate to history. It was a literary and political work, and never claimed that the camps were to be seen only in an historical or quantitative perspective. And I think that's important. We have that distinction again, how do you fictionalise history? 1971, the KGB tries to assassinate Solzhenitsyn, just after he's got the Nobel Prize. And they use ricin. He's very, very sick, but he survived. He's got cancer, he's had cancer in remission, ricin, et cetera. So, "The Gulag Archipelago" was not published, obviously, in the Soviet Union. It was viciously criticised by the party-controlled Soviet press. And interestingly, they accused Solzhenitsyn of supporting Hitlerites in the Soviet Union. We get the echo of Nazis and Hitler through Putin. We get the echo of it through the KGB here, you know, associating anybody who's an enemy with Hitler, of course. And they wrote, this is what the KGB wrote, which was pumped into Russian, and into the Russian press. "Solzhenitsyn is a man who is choking with pathological hatred for the country which gave him birth, for the socialist system, and for our Soviet people." "Choking with pathological hatred"? Quite strict, quite strong. During this period, he was sheltered by the cellist Rostropovich, who suffered because of his support for Solzhenitsyn, and he himself was forced into exile. Finally, under Andropov, the pretty unhumorous KGB chief, and the West German chancellor at the time, Willy Brandt, do a deal. Solzhenitsyn can live and work freely in West Germany, and he's deported, and goes to live there. And this is where the top picture on the left is when he's arriving in, with Heinrich Boll, you can see at the back with the cigarette, in West Germany in 1974. Now the KGB had found the manuscript for the first part of "The Gulag Archipelago," but an American military attache, William Odom, had managed to smuggle it out, in addition to the other one I mentioned from Estonia. And in his own memoir in 1995, called "Invisible Allies," Solzhenitsyn mentions and pays tribute to Odom's role, for helping to get the book out. So he goes to West Germany, he lives with Boll. Then he moves to Zurich, and then Stanford University invites him, and he moved to Vermont finally in '76. In '78, he gave an address condemning, let's call it, the lack of spirituality and traditional values in Western culture, critical of both. And I know that he received very negative press, you know, in not only America, but in Western culture. "You're not grateful, you're not thankful," et cetera. The KGB gave an order under Andropov to begin what they called, inverted commas from the KGB's report, "and create an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion about him." They constantly sent him envelopes with photographs of car crashes, of people being tortured, of people receiving ricin and other

chemical weapons, of people suffering from brain injuries, brain surgery, and other disturbing imagery, getting all this being sent by some vague sources. But of course, it's from the KGB. He is critical of Western materialism, Western individualism. He's critical of Russian communism. Finally, the KGB later concluded that he had alienated sufficient number of Americans, so he no longer, by his criticism of the American way of life, "so we no longer need to take quite active measures against Solzhenitsyn." Over the next 17 years, he worked on "The Russian Revolution of 1917," "The Red Wheel," and so on. And he was feted by Cheney and Rumsfeld and Ford and Reagan. He was criticised by the liberal side in America as we, I'll talk more about it next week, for what was perceived also as his Russian nationalism and Russian Orthodox religion. And because he'd criticised what he called a spiritual emptiness of the West, he'd become more and more imbued with Russian Orthodox Christianity, and, you know, talked about the human soul, in the tradition of the Russian writers, and that the soul longs for warmer, purer, higher things than today's mass production living, mass production living and the stupidity of television. He was criticised, of course, for what he saw as a weakness of the West.

But what is interesting, what isn't mentioned in all these criticisms, is that he had made it abundantly clear that he absolutely admired and revered what he called the political liberty of Western democratic societies. And there's a major speech that he gave in 1993 in Lichtenstein, where he implored the West, and I'm quoting, "Please, never lose sight of your values, the stability of civic life under the rule of law. Please, never say yes to fascism. Please say yes to every private citizen, and human rights," and he goes on and on, phrases which almost echo today. Finally, he returned to Russia in 1994, and this is, he's returned to Russia, and he called for Russia in 1994, and I'm quoting him, "Russia, Russians, renounce all the mad fantasies of foreign and local conquest. Begin the peaceful, long, long period of recuperation from our terrible past." He's aware in '94. Begin healing, begin recuperation. A bit Mandela-like, and humble. "Renounce all mad fantasies of foreign and local conquest." Some instinct of a writer perhaps, for seeing, you know, times we live in. This is the picture taken in 1994, when he embarked on a famous train trip from Vladivostok to Moscow, all across the whole of Russia, to meet people, talk, to kind of rediscover Russia for himself. Now, to go on a train trip through the whole of Russia, from Vladivostok all the way through, after 20 years in exile, he's returned in 1994 with his wife Natalia. And of course, by the way, his three sons stayed behind in America, and became American citizens. But it shows the commitment, like all the Russian writers that we've looked at, to the land, to the notion of the Russian nationalism, to the notion of Russian identity, to the search, the connection between the land, the former peasantry, the emancipation, the aristocrats. What was that Slavik or that Russian identity all about, in relation to the West? He's now lived in the West. The assimilation of ideas of democracy and communism,

totalitarianism and capitalism, the ideas of that in the 20th century, and of course going back to way before. Why does Russia position itself in the superior, inferior, eternal binary between nations and between ethnic and religious groups? It's an eternal binary. It's an eternal conflict. Jostling for, you know, "Snakes and Ladders," who's up the ladder of superiority, who's down, inferior, certainly of religions, races, nations. And for me, Solzhenitsyn is absolutely part of it. I think in the end, he hankered, but not as naively as Tolstoy and the others, for a kind of return to only just the land and, you know, work on the land and be happy chappies and all that. There is a bit of that, but he's gone through too much hell to really believe in that. So I think there's something of a philosophical, or we could say, naive hankering towards a kind of Russian Orthodox Christianity, hence his obsession later with writing the book of Jewish and Christian Russians, "Two Hundred Years Together," that book. But he's trying to find how the religion works in relation to the land, nationality, identity. Assimilate or not, absorb ideas from the West, or from further East, or wherever, or not. You know, what do you do with this terribly vexed question of nationalism, and how do you do it, or what do you do with it? Do you have a benevolent belief in it? Do you have an imperious belief in it? What, where, and how? You know, eternal questions going back to the Roman Empire, and before, and beyond. He finally died of heart failure in 2008, at the age of 89. Remarkable life, and I think it captures so much of what certain individuals in Russia, perhaps in Africa, South Africa, many parts of the world went through, in a way, you know, capturing so much of the 20th century in an individual. But because he is a writer, we get it expressed in this, what I'm calling fictionalised history. It's a literary approach to understanding history and culture, not a quantitative or strictly factual.

Okay, the book, to go into the book itself. Ivan Denisovich is a prisoner in the gulag. He's serving, the character Ivan, is serving a 10-year sentence for some vague political crime which is nonsense, but he's been hardened by the camps. And he realises that survival, the main theme of it for me, requires a quick eye, certain risk taking, a stolen plate, a hidden trowel, a bit of smuggled metal, a favour here, a simple task there, a few crumbs of bread somewhere else. For a guard, do as much as you need to, but no more, and so on, for survival. From the moment Ivan wakes up, until the moment he goes to sleep, there's only one thing in his mind. "How on Earth am I going to survive? So I have a one in seven, a one in eight, a tiny chance maybe, of getting out of this hell." The theme of surviving the deprivations of the Soviet work camp, the essence of the story. And he observes other prisoners. Some survive by wit, some by luck, some survive by sinking into utter inhumanity. Some become thieves, some become scavengers, some become stool pigeons, snitch. Some, many, will not survive. They won't survive the terrible cold, the beatings, the deprivation, the the total lack of food, disease, illness. And Ivan is determined not to be one of them. The men that will survive need to

know what Solzhenitsyn later called the unwritten laws of the camp. And I remember Primo Levi, where, and others, and I'm not for a second trying to equate the concentration camps with these Siberian labour camps. I'm merely looking at the notion of survival, which Primo talks about, and of course, Solzhenitsyn, and many others. You have to, and I remember, and Primo talks about, and I'm paraphrasing. "You need to understand that the ordinary rules of society do not apply. It's a complete opposite." So there's no rationality whatsoever. It's pure absurdity. And Solzhenitsyn alludes to this in the book "Ivan Denisovich." It's, you know, the unwritten laws of the camp are the real ones. That's all that matters. You share your parcel with the right people. Never share a parcel with the wrong person. Share your parcel first with a squad leader. Watch out for your tools, hide them. Obey, do not fight the authority no matter what, and goes on and on, you know, of what the prisoner Ivan discovers, how to survive. Is Ivan a hero? It's a question that people have asked often, reading it. And Solzhenitsyn himself asked, and he said no. But what he has to do is carve out a new identity, which cannot be lived according to the rules of people living outside the camp. It can, so identity forged with entirely new rules, laws, unspoken, unwritten rules or laws, and to get, become aware of them super quick, to survive. A new identity must be forged, to survive. James Joyce, in "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," he wrote that, "What the artist of the 20th century and after needs is three qualities, silence, exile, and cunning." And I know the word cunning has a pejorative meaning in colloquial terms, in certain English language countries around the world.

But if we look at the true meaning of the word cunning, we can go way back to Odysseus, and Homer's "Odyssey." It's by cunning and wit and sharpness of eye and quick thinking of how to survive. You know, it's part of Homer's story, becoming a boy to man, but also how to survive, and mature in the world. What's the motto of the Mossad? "By deception, shall we wage war." I think it's from the Bible, if I'm right, cunning. So you have to survive with food. Food takes on a special importance in the story, of course. Every bit of bread is a symbol of life, cherished. Piece of oatmeal, piece of stew. It's part of it. But not only to eat, but to trade, becomes the medium of a trade and exchange. Steal for it, kill for it, anything. Suffering, suffering of course is one of the great themes in all the Russian literature going back that we've looked at. And whether it's beatings or food deprivation, the terrible freezing cold, disease, illness, you know, people dying all over, suffering everywhere, not knowing if you'll ever be really released, you know, or what will happen. The human condition of suffering. As Beckett once said after the Second World War, and he'd come back from hiding in the South of France, and looking around in Paris. "Humanity is on its knees. I see suffering everywhere. I see humanity on its knees." These are poets and literary figures, trying to find artistic ways to express historical events or something in their life. Obviously the human condition of terrible cruelty, you know, cruelty and suffering. How do you write this? But

in this kind of semi-poetic or literary artistic way, again, not just factual way or legalistic. You know, where you have no restraint on human cruelty, but cruelty is the norm. Suffering is the norm. Lack of food, lack of, you know, and endless disease, these are all the norm of the rules in the camp. So what do you do? How do you outwit? How do you survive? So the prison becomes obviously, where violence, and to use this vague term abuse, but violence and other horrors, and cruelty, become the absolute norm. Everything is inverted. And even Mandela in his autobiography, "Long Walk to Freedom," alludes to this. Primo, as I mentioned, alludes in a way to how the rules of society completely turn upside down. Life in the camp, of course, Solzhenitsyn later mentioned, it brought out the character of people. Well, of course, any extreme situation will do that. It's part of prison writing. There's "Papillon," there's "A Bridge Over the River Kwai." There's so many others, we call the genre prison writing. But that does a disservice to it. I think it's more about human nature, in extreme or semi-extreme circumstances. But is it so extreme when related to normal daily life? And that's what Solzhenitsyn started to bring together, later with this book, and looking at normal, inverted commas, so-called normal rules of society. Fascinatingly in the book "Ivan, A Day in the Life," there's hardly any political statement. There's hardly any political generalisation. He leaves it out. He also picks on, and that's the literary scholar, the literary writer. He also turns on the idea of the absurd. Now this is before, or maybe he read a bit of Carew before the war, but he was too young, I doubt it. He talks about the ridiculousness of the rules, put in place by government. So the absurdity of the government, because it's a government that is creating these rules for the camp, which are the opposite to the rules outside the camp. Whether you live in Moscow, Saint Petersburg or wherever, or, you know, Paris, Berlin, wherever. So it's, but it's created by bureaucrats in the so-called normal cities, are able to imagine and think these rules. Well, maybe it's not so crazy, and I don't have to, everybody, you'll know other examples from 20th century and other history. So it's fascinating that government bureaucrats and government policymaker thinkers are thinking of these things, to create the exact opposite of so-called civilised whatever rules, for political prisoners or any others. For examples, and he talks about this in the book, men must take off their hats, in the subfreezing cold, whenever you pass a guard. We've seen this often happen in many other prison camp stories, not only in film. There also, limitations are made on the number of sick people allowed into the so-called infirmary, which is barely an infirmary, on any date. So it's driven by the numbers. You allowed, you know, 50 in, or 20, or 10, Monday, Tuesday, different numbers each day, just all to mess with the mind, all to control the mind, I believe. Work under the Soviet rule is declared to be a form of medicine. It's not "Arbeit macht frei." It's "Work is a form of medicine." You know, this is, this is Orwell. This is Big Brother. This is "1984," endlessly, again and again. Ironically, the worst work site in the book, in the camp, is called the Socialist Way of Life Village. And that's where the

worst terrors and cruelties take place, the Socialist Way of Life Village. And it's literally called that in the camp. What he makes remarkable, and I remember reading this, you know, when all those years ago, is how comprehensible the story is. It's direct, easily understandable, direct prose. And it's so immediate and so direct. You feel you've been spoken to by the narrator, so, as if the person is right there. It follows the classic Aristotelian structure of a unity of time, place and action. It all takes place in the camp. There's one central character, Ivan, and the action, and so on. It all takes place in one area. So it's a very classical structure, going back 2,000-and-a-half thousand years, of how to tell a story, and how to, again, fictionalise history. 'Cause of course he's drawing on his own experiences in the camp, but he's not saying, which is actually factually true to his experience, and which isn't. So a couple of phrases which I've always loved from the book. "The belly is an ungrateful wretch. It never remembers past favours. It always wants more tomorrow." "Can a man who is warm understand one who is freezing?" I'm going to put this up here. "Can a man who is warm understand one who is freezing?" It's so simple, it's almost banal, and ridiculous. It seems pathetically simple, and perhaps a bit stupid, but I actually think it echoes like a line from a poem. You know, can a person really who's warm, and just can we really understand someone who's really freezing, but really? You know, can our imaginations make that leap? Or is it too hard, or too scary? Some other quotes from the book. "Beat a dog once, and you only have to show him the whip.

Now we know this kind of sentiment and idea expressed many times, but the way he puts words together in the translation is great. "Beat a dog once, and you only have to show him the whip." It becomes a memorable line immediately. The mark of the writer, the artist. "A day without a dark cloud, almost a happy day." You get a touch of the ironic wit, you know, and it's, there is this ironic wit, dark wit, inside the book. "The bowl of soup, it was dearer than freedom, dearer than life itself." The novel itself was a literary and political bombshell. As I said, I gave the story of it, and I became prescribed in, for millions of school children in the old Soviet Union, so that they all read it, and you know, together with others. And it was translated and went into the Western world completely. The book for me has a very modern voice, very contemporary. It's post-second World War, but it's almost, I think can speak to us today. It's so immediate and direct. It's so devoid of endless descriptions, of endless, sort of pseudo analysing, of endless, roundabout, novelistic, portrayals of other things. It cuts to the chase. It's like a movie. It cuts to the chase, and it's not a novel. And this is Solzhenitsyn talking. It's not a novel of refined Victorian sensibility. It's the language of the camp, the language of the street, the language of people who live this. And he's trying to capture that. Of course, he lived it for eight years, You know, it's all there.

Now, he's got a fascinating idea, which he wrote about later about the book. The state would not understand truth. "If you understand the truth, you'll be punished." "If you tell the truth, you'll be punished." So what happened to that relationship between truth and lie, and I touched on this when I gave a talk on Vaclav Havel, and who's also obsessed with the truth and the lie, because it's the lie that holds the whole society together. Everything is a lie. Everything's Orwellian language. If you tell the truth, you'll be punished. When you are cold, you steal cloth to cover the open window. And that's a metaphor for, don't tell the truth if you don't want to be punished or tortured or imprisoned. It's the history of men having a nightmare only to wake up to find it's real, the recognition what humans can really do to other humans, but also not only the horrors they can do, but the surprising, what Primo calls, moments of reprieve, the moments of humanity, of spirituality, where generosity and compassion, even love, really connect. And it makes those moments even more cherished, and remarkably heightened. Octavia Paz wrote this about, you know, the great writer wrote this about Solzhenitsyn. "Solzhenitsyn speaks from another tradition. His voice is not modern. It's an ancient, yet tempered voice. It's ancientness is that of old Russian Christianity. But it is a Christianity that is passed through the central experience of our century, the dehumanisation of the totalitarian concentration camps. In a century of false testimonies, a writer becomes the witness to man." I think it's an amazing insight of Octavia Paz. In a century of false testimonies, lies, deceit, propaganda, not only the Nazi period, but so many periods, all the way through history, 20th century and before, of the history of lies. False testimony, false representation of what is the truth. A writer becomes witness to man himself, not just to society, but to the human being. Where do we take opposition in this endless, let's call it creative, destructive tension between truth and lie? Ivan has committed no fault, but he's condemned to life in a prison camp. He's been stripped of everything in the book, lost his wife, his children, his freedom. He owns nothing but ragged clothes that he wears. Crust of bread is hidden in the mattress. Solzhenitsyn writes, "Though he must be a beast in the camp, Ivan often remembered how he used to eat in the village. Potatoes, great hunks of meat, and they swilled enough milk to make their bellies burst. But he understood in the camps this was all wrong. You had to eat your food with all thoughts on the food, like he was nibbling those little bits of bread, no. It's so evocative, it's so contemporary. This is written in 1961, '62, and yet 70 years later, 80 years later, it speaks to me so directly still. You know, it's poetic. It's so direct and evocative, and it doesn't have the endless use of adjectives and adverbs, what the gulag strips the human being to. But the human being can survive perhaps by finding another code for identity, within the overall dilemmas of what is Russian identity. So he's adding this in, to the very notion of what is the Russian identity. And I think that's a remarkable contribution, and insight that Solzhenitsyn himself had. And it's something that Octavio Paz alludes to here, because he's gone through the central

experience of the century, the totalitarian camps. So he's adding in, in Russian identity and other identities in the world, you've got to include the horror of the prison. He talks about, "The choice for writers," this is Solzhenitsyn's phrase, "is between fatal compromise and deliberate concealment." It's understanding the lie and truth all the time. You know, he talks about how the camp was a cross-section of Russian society, prisoners from virtually every professional, social, ethnic group in the Soviet Union. Artists, intellectuals, criminals, peasants, lawyers, doctors, former government officials, army officers, Ukrainians, Estonians, Latvians, Gipsies. It's a microcosm, but the laws, the rules, are inverted. He wants to give the reader not only a literal, realistic sense of life in the camp, but it's an allegory for me, of the whole society. See, I think this is the great contribution. He incorporates and says, "Russian identity can never be excluded now." On an allegorical level from the camp to not Stalinist Soviet Russia, but life in these kind of totalitarian societies, what democracies could become, what the Stalinist rule was actually about. Ivan's fate, it's an allegory of what has happened in the whole society, to everybody, has been compromised and corrupted. But it, how people behave has changed in the ways he understands. So it's not something separate from the society. It's actually a metaphor, how a society is actually structured, if one digs deep enough. It's obviously like Kafka's "The Trial." Joseph K. is arrested, but he doesn't know why, or for what reason, is a reason. He tries to find out. The court bureaucracy operates on incomprehensible rules. The lawyers and the priests can't give him an answer, Joseph K., in "The Trial" of Kafka's. The lawyers, the priests, the bureaucrats, nobody knows why. What's the real reason? We don't know. It's not any absurd, it's a lie. And so he finally concludes in Kafka, he must be guilty. Otherwise, why would they have done this to him? They can't be wrong. He must be wrong. So he willingly submits to his own execution in Kafka's "The Trial." Ivan in the book, the bird seeks the cage. Ivan in the book is arrested, also sent to the camps. Absurd, ridiculous reasons. Same as the, the other inmates. He doesn't understand, the same, the legalities of the system. He doesn't understand. Pretends to be this, but actually is that, and unless we make that link, we cannot understand contemporary world. He meets only cruel, minor petty officials of the system. Not only do they obey orders, but they don't, they can't give any explanation that is based on truth or reason. The intellectuals around Ivan don't have the answers in the prison.

What happens? Do you end up with Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus?" Despair, passivist acceptance, keep rolling the rock up and down the hill? Do you try and fight, or do you try and use your wits like Odysseus in Homer's "Odyssey?" Use your cunning, your silence, your wit, your intelligence, your subtlety, your nuance, to understand the rules are the opposite of what everybody tells you, and find a way to survive within that. And it's the great truth of how to survive, not only in the camp, but how to survive in Soviet Russia. I remember living in Prague. People say that's how you have to survive. Apartheid

South Africa and many other countries, perhaps even the democracies of today, how do we really survive them day to day? Coming back to the phrase, you know, here he is towards later in his life. The lie, the truth. I'm going to come back to this phrase here. "Let the lie come into the world, let it even triumph, but not through me." For me, that's the motto of his life and what he understands, that the lie is not only in the camp. The lie is in ordinary everyday society, but let it not come through me. Suffer the hell. Try and write about it, whatever, you know, as one tries to do. And in our own times, you know, the relationship between lie and truth, survival, as fascism encroaches in the West, you know, and where democracies are obviously under threat. What is the theme of our times? Perhaps that, where's the role of human rights, of justice, democracy? This finally, are two statues. The one in left is in Poland, to Solzhenitsyn, and ironically in Moscow, there's the big statue, always with flowers, of Solzhenitsyn himself. And in the great contemporary times, as always, his face is put on the two rubles coin, of Solzhenitsyn. So gone through this whole remarkable life, ends up a face on a two ruble coin. Terrible irony, 2007, this is a year before he dies. He's 88 here, is when he met Putin. And you can see, Putin is trying to be, trying to show he looks up to the great elder, et cetera, et cetera. I don't want to get into a whole discussion about Putin, whether he was something different that has changed now or whatever. But you know, it shows ultimately, you know, the president of the country, ex KGB and you know, the position of the writer in Russian literature in a way. And the position of this giant, for me, of the 20th century. Okay, thank you so much everybody. Let's hold it there and, okay, thank you Herbert. Some questions?

Q & A and Comments

– Yeah, a picture of Solzhenitsyn and Rostropovich. Picture with him and Rostropovich, yeah, the great Russian cellist known as Slava, thanks Barbara.

– Herbert, "Rostropovich, I think Slava comes from his first name. The great cellist of the century," absolutely.

– Q: David, "Maybe I missed it, but what training or education did he have?"

A: Ah, it's a good point. He went to Rostov University in Rostov, and he studied mathematics primarily. He didn't study. He went to classes on literature and philosophy and so on. But he studied mathematics. And mathematics is what he taught at the high school when he was released from prison.

Q: Betty, "How did he make a living when he was writing?"

A: He taught, when he was allowed out of prison and in internal exile for those four years in Kazakhstan, he taught mathematics in a school, in a very small village, town.

– Audrey, "I was lucky to hear Rostropovich," great. "With the Israeli Philharmonic," fantastic, "in 1978." Fantastic.

Q: Betty, "Where did his children end up living?"

A: His three sons from his second marriage ended up living in America. I don't know if they're still there. As far as I know, they took out American citizenship. Thanks, yeah.

Q: David, "What makes these fellow citizens impose such regimes in the camps on their fellows?"

A: That's the eternal question. If we knew that we, David, great question. We would probably, you know, answer so much about society. But what fascinates me is that these are people sitting in ordinary offices, bureaucracies and government institutions. They are dreaming up these rules, which are the opposite of the rules they claim to live by, but the rules that will be for the camps, not only to break the person, but to control them. So, and what's, so what's fascinating for me is that link for Solzhenitsyn between the camp is a metaphor for the society. Because if they can dream up these rules for people in the camps, aren't they doing it for people in the society itself, but just in a more sophisticated, Orwellian language kind of way? That to me is a fascinating addition that Solzhenitsyn adds onto the whole question of running a society and Russian identity. Because if you can imagine it for a camp, why can't you imagine it in a more sophisticated way, like Orwell, for your own society? Are they so different? And that's what Foucault talks about in his book, "Madness and Civilization."

– Rose, thank you. "Primo, an Italian Jew like my mom. Sadly could not," yeah yeah, absolutely, thank you.

– Evelyn, thank you.

– Sheila, thanks, "The Mossad's motto from Proverbs 24:6. 'By size guided,' maybe you mean wise guidance? "You can save your," okay, we'll have to check the translations.

– Ruth, thank you. Bev, thanks,

Q: "Did Solzhenitsyn engage with other survivors?"

A: I tried to find some research, and I'm going to do more of this. You're asking if he's a, fascinating question, Bev. Did he engage with survivors from other camps, like Auschwitz and others? And I'm going

to look into this more for next week, when I talk primarily about "The Gulag," "The Gulag Archipelago," his other main book, for me, his other main book, and the book with, about "Two Hundred Years." I'm going to talk about that as well, of Russian Christians and Russian Jews.

– Barbara, thanks. Dina, thank you. Judith, thank you.

Q: Rima raised the question of how "the method to which Ivan Denisovich arrives, described the day. Perhaps also important to note that although Ivan is a very simple man, he preserves his human dignity."

A: Yes, I mean, Rima, you're absolutely right. He tries to preserve some attributes of his human dignity, during the day. He doesn't beg, as you say. He tries not to stoop for anyone, yeah, exactly. Okay, "He tries as a simple guy," yeah, "to hold some human dignity."

– William, "Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, truth, lies," whoa. That's a huge fantastic question for another time.

– Platt BS, Barbara Platt, I'm not sure. "In the U.S. those who should be in prison for political terror are in our Congress." Well, look at Boris here, you know? Party time, all the rest of it.

– Gene, thanks, thanks. Barbara, thank you. Robin, "Either the U.S. has become a gulag." Well these are maybe highly sophisticated versions. You know, if we look at, Foucault's argument is that, which is the same as Solzhenitsyn, is that the prison, the asylum for the lunatic, are metaphors of society itself, or elements of society. Because human imagination of bureaucrats, leaders, ordinary people can imagine these ideas for a camp, a lunatic asylum or where the crazies go, whatever. So it's not so divorced from the actual society structure itself, because the same people are dreaming up both, how to structure society and how to structure the prison. That's for Foucault's idea. And Solzhenitsyn talks about it in his memoirs, and he links starting with "Ivan Denisovich," with that very idea, 1962, that is representative of the whole Soviet system. And we can look, and George Orwell also talks about that, you know. He's not trying to talk only about the fictitious Soviet, in "1984" and others, you know, about the Soviet Union or a fictitious, totalitarian state. He's talking about, in "The road to Wigan Pier," you know, and "1984," relating it to England, in certain ways, not in the most crude, obvious, obscene detail of these camps, but in far more subtle, sophisticated methods of control of human beings in a society, really. As ancient as the Romans themselves, that question. 'Cause you have to control the people if you're going to rule them.

– Bobby, "So you are saying that even though the rules in the camp are the opposite of the rules surviving in the outside world, there's a

similarity." Yes, and that's where truth and lies get muddled. Exactly, it's a fantastic, thank you Bobby. You've summed it up far better than me, in one sentence. That the rules for survival in the camp and outside are apparently opposite, but it makes truth and lies be muddled, as you're saying, in the so-called normal world, yep. You've put it superbly in your four lines. Remains, yep, like Elie Wiesel's search for meaning, yeah, Viktor Frankl.

- Myrna, "The inmates didn't understand the rules, but neither did the guards, it would seem. One could probably go way up the line of authority." Yeah, and that's with Kafka's "The Trial." They don't need to understand the rules or why, in order to implement them. They just do them. Whether they're scared or they're going to lose their job or whatever, they just do them, but they don't question to try and understand, you know, the rhyme or reason behind them.

Q: Bobby, "How are the themes of "Ivan" and "The Gulag Archipelago" different?"

A: We'll look at that next week, when we look at "The Gulag," the book.

Q: Rhonda, "Would he have met Vasily Grossman?"

A: Great question, thank you Rhonda. I'll have a look at that for next week.

Q: Diane, "How do you interpret his interest in Christianity late in life?"

A: He was a committed Marxist during the war, and a captain, as I said, in the Red Army. But then when all this happened to him afterwards, what the hell is the point of committing himself to Stalinism and the Marxism? This is what happens from a few letters. And I think he started, from what I understand, in the memoirs, he started in the time in the prison camps, if you like, resurrecting an interest in Russian Orthodox Christianity. And, but he always talked about it from the translation might be not be the best, but from a philosophical point of view, not a sort of obsessive belief in a God, the ideas of the Orthodox Church, of Christianity, and I guess to try and find some other meaning or another approach to believing in compassion, love, kindness, forgiveness.

Q: Ralph, "Did he ever meet Arthur Koestler?"

A: Don't know, I'll check it again for next week. Great question.

- Susan, thank you.

Q: Ellen, "Did he receive royalties?"

A: Yes, well he certainly received royalties when those brief four-year period when Khrushchev was in power. And as I said, this is the only book that was allowed during the whole Soviet communist time, that was allowed to be published and read, by millions of Russians, and studied. And this book, and then others were translated, got into the West, and of course, I don't know if he got the royalties in the Soviet Union, actually. Good question. Obviously he got the royalties when he went to live in the West, in the early '70s, in West Germany first.

– Debbie, thank you. Okay, that's it. Thank you very much everybody.