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Political Science

Ivan Denisovich Shukov: The Intellectual Who Lived

In the frozen tundra of Siberia, Ivan Denisovich Shukov is a citizen of a perfect communist society blessed by equality, where a lowly worker like himself may at last be appreciated... yet only because his keen understanding of the social and economic fabric of the Gulag facilitated his discovery of the most effective strategies for surviving forced-labor camp. Although the ideal vision of communist society was one of social equality and plentiful resources, in fact Stalin's prison camps were notably limited in supplies, contributing to a cutthroat zero sum gain situation in the camps; notably Shukov excels at exploiting this situation by seizing every opportunity to cheat the prison system for his gain. Furthermore this zero sum gain scenario reverts the camp to a "state of nature" where the camp's indifference to the welfare of individuals gives rise to unwritten laws of conduct, an underground social contract between zeks and their squad-members; Shukov demonstrates particular understanding of this as well, based on his deeply cooperative, practically familial relationship with his squad. Above all Shukov's ability to barter his services for favors with other prisoners provides him with the final advantage he needs to endure the Gulag year after year. Shukov's clever, practical, and especially resourceful nature makes him uniquely able to endure the merciless, zero-sum-gain state of nature which defines the Gulag.

Shukov manages the zero sum gain situation of the camp by mercilessly cheating the prison system and seizing illicit advantage at every opportunity. For instance, when Shukov receives his bread ration in the morning, he does not consume it all, but illegally stashes part of the bread to consume later. Shukov's chosen method is to sew the bread into his sawdust mattress (21). That Shukov is willing to fill his bread with sawdust just so he can eat it later demonstrates that he's willing to invest considerable discomfort for advantage over other zeks.

Later in the day he lifts a useful-looking piece of broken hacksaw blade from the snow and hides it in his pocket. He doesn't even know what he'll need it for yet, but he's confident that he can create a useful tool out of the blade (69). Shukov understands that he must break the rules to get ahead in a zero sum gain society; as a result he takes advantage of every tiny shard of metal presented to him. Additionally as Shukov prepared to be frisked by the guards, he opted to hide the blade in his mitten rather than throw it away (103). By a stroke of luck the guard did not pat down the mitten containing the blade... but Shukov would certainly have been placed in the cells if the blade had been found. Shukov would only take such astounding risks to cheat the prison system if he believed they would pay off considerably, and in the zero sum gain society of the Gulag, this is exactly how Shukov gained advantage: by taking risks to cheat the prison system whenever he could.

Furthermore Shukov demonstrates profound awareness of the state of nature within the camp by making cooperation within his squad a priority. Although the zeks compete for limited resources, it is the squads which compete, not individual zeks. This situation logically demands an underground social contract between squad members: "we all must work, so that all may eat —and if *you* don't work, *we* will not feed you." For instance, as the squad toiled in the arctic cold building a wall, one man dared to sabotage the group effort to make his work easier: "[Fetiukov] would tilt the barrow as he came up, the lousy bastard, so that the mortar would slop out of it and then it'd be lighter to carry." Shukov called him out, "Hey, you damn bastard. When you were an overseer I'll bet you made your men sweat" (79). Shukov can certainly understand the man's tiredness, but for Shukov, no individual has the right to compromise the group work simply because *he* is tired. That Shukov would interrupt the work to confront the man demonstrates how strongly he believed in the squad's social contract: equal labor from all. Moreover Solzhenitsyn notes that "A guard can't get people to budge even in working hours, but a squad leader can tell his men to get on the job even during the break, and they'll do it.

Because he's the one who feeds them. And he'd never make them work for nothing" (73). This analysis sheds some light on the—ideally—hyper-cooperative nature of squads. Everything is in equal share, from work to food, and they have reverence for their squad leader, who feeds them much like a father does. Perhaps most notably, after it is time to leave work for dinner, Shukov stays late to finish the work. "How can we ever let you out? We just can't do without you," jokes his squad leader (87). By doing his squad this immense favor, Shukov fulfills the most important part of the social contract: every squad member must make himself useful. With a keen understanding of the importance of the social contract within his squad, Shukov does everything he can to ensure that his squad's work yields the best results possible, so that they all may eat.

Perhaps most importantly, Shukov facilitates his own survival by doing services for other prisoners which place them in his debt. Solzhenitsyn states early on that "any old timer could always earn a bit -by sewing a pair of mittens for someone..." (3). It is notable that Shukov does the favor to earn a "bit", not merely to be a friendly neighbor. Rather, these favors are given with the understanding that they will be paid back to Shukov. Secondly Shukov waits for Tsezar's parcel at the message board, *knowing there isn't a parcel for himself* (102). This may seem like a waste of time but this too is an investment which Shukov makes with the understanding that Tsezar will return the favor—perhaps by sharing some of the parcel with him. In addition Shukov thinks that even if Tsezar doesn't come to claim his spot in line, Shukov could sell the spot in line for something else (102). Either way, somebody owes Shukov a favor, and by placing people in his debt, Shukov can ensure that someone will provide him with help when *he* needs it. Shukov further offers to bring Tsezar's soup to him from the kitchen... but Tsezar gives Shukov the soup (110). In a way Shukov manipulates his fellow zeks into helping him by doing them these constant unsolicited favors. But in fact Shukov does not deal in favors at all. Rather, each time he does someone a "favor", he brokers an unspoken deal with the other zek; and in

the Gulag, underground contracts are honored. Shukov uses his services as a currency to earn favor with his yellow zeks.