



My Grandfather And Solzhenitsyn

August 14, 2008 **Ilan I. Berman** *National Review Online*

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The first days of August brought with them news that one of Russia's great public figures, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, had died at the age of 89. There are a great many reasons to mourn his passing. During his more than six decades in the public spotlight, Solzhenitsyn was an intellectual giant, a courageous opponent of Soviet repression, a crusader against communism's excesses, and a champion of moral truth in a system that brooked no ideological opposition. For me, however, he was also much more.

My grandfather, Mikhail Zilberman, was a Soviet soldier during what Russians still call the "Great Patriotic War": World War II. He volunteered to go to the front lines in 1941, when Hitler violated the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact by sending his Wehrmacht into Soviet territory. The same year, my grandfather was captured in the Ukraine during operations against German forces. For the remaining four years of the conflict, he languished as a German prisoner of war until liberated in 1945 by Allied troops.

After the war, my grandfather—a chemist by profession—was offered work and sanctuary in the West. He refused. To him, Mother Russia had always been home, and abandoning her and his family was simply unthinkable.

The Soviet leadership, however, felt differently. For them, patriotic soldiers were expected to make the ultimate sacrifice for the Motherland on the field of combat, or by their own hand if the tide of battle turned. And so my grandfather's decision to return to the U.S.S.R. proved to be a fateful one. Branded a traitor, he was sentenced to a quarter-century of hard labor for failing to perish on the front lines, and not killing himself upon being captured. (He ultimately would serve ten of those years, receiving a commuted sentence when Josef Stalin died in 1953).

This story would simply be a sad footnote in my family history, were it not for Solzhenitsyn. His masterful work on Soviet repression, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, first published in 1962, details the life of a Soviet soldier serving hard time for fictitious crimes against the Soviet system in the aftermath of World War II, much like my grandfather.

The similarities are not coincidental. Himself a "zek" (a prisoner of the Soviet Union's network of labor camps known as the Gulag), Solzhenitsyn served at least a portion of his time in the same Siberian work camp—and even the same cell block—as my grandfather. And although the two men never met, the people and places described in *One Day* are ripped directly from my grandfather's life. Unknowingly, Solzhenitsyn had become his biographer.

My grandfather is now long gone. He passed away peacefully in New England more than a decade and a half ago, having made the journey from prisoner to free man, and from the Soviet Union to the West. But his memory—and that of the millions of other victims of the vicious and corrupt system of social control that dominated the Soviet Union—lives on in Solzhenitsyn's courageous work. His passing should spur all of us to rededicate ourselves to making sure that such repression can never occur again.