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Motivations For Survival

At what level of restriction is a life deemed not worth living at all? A life of imprisonment with very few liberties is undesirable to say the least, but the loss of such unalienable freedoms by no fault of your own is unimaginable. For the character Wladislaw Szpillman in the movie *The Pianist*, his sole purpose and need for survival stems from his fight for the common good of the race of Jews against oppression and genocide brought on by the Nazi regime during his years spent in the Warsaw ghetto during World War II. He is still however fighting for his own survival with selfish motivations to also live to see the day when the Jews are freed. While in the novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Ivan Denisovich Shukhov is motivated merely by the thought of his own survival through the time he has earned himself in a Soviet labor camp until he is set free. The varying motivations of Szpillman and Shukhov have noticeable effects on the way they act and the way they think, while their shared lack of freedoms and basic necessities for survival illuminate several obvious comparisons between the two.

Both Szpillman and Shukhov are affected by outside characters several different ways. Szpillman is influenced both by the antagonistic Nazi’s and also by many Germans that surprise him with their support. For Shukhov, he is the main protagonist for his own life. His gang supports him in some ways but nowhere near to the extent Szpillman is aided by people on the outside. In *The Pianist*, Szpillman is most obviously affected by the Nazis who inflict random and cruel punishment upon him. They separate him from his family, strip him of all his material belongings, and destroy his right of self-determination among many others. However, Szpillman does receive significant support from people who are against the acts of genocide and imprisonment of Jews. For example, the cello player and her husband aid him with an apartment to hide out in from the Nazis (*The Pianist*). These people were willing to risk their lives for the only cause Szpillman was motivated to live for. The gangs in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* “make prisoners keep each other on their toes” and also provide Shukhov with some sense of support and belonging. However, the gang system was mostly so “the fellows at the top didn’t have to worry” and it wasn’t designed for a prisoner’s personal good (Solzhenitsyn, 66). Generally speaking, the prisoners are on their own and sometimes act for their own benefits disregarding the needs of others. The character Moldavian in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* falls asleep on the job and arrives late for roll call, making everyone wait out in the cold while he was enjoying a nap. The gang members punish his acts of selfishness but Moldavian clearly felt as if his need for a nap was more important than the well being of his gang members. The prisoners curse, “that damn Moldavian”(Solzhenitsyn, 138) for making them wait out in the cold. But Moldavian feels little guilt for his actions because he knows the way of life in prison justifies his selfish actions to get what he needs. A prisoner’s own survival is his sole motivation for all that he does.

The work environments of the two men are very different but the harsh conditions they are faced with lead them both to carry out various acts of rebellion. Shukhov, unlike Szpillman, is awarded pay for his work, even though it is very miniscule. He is also allowed freedom of speech and comments that, “here you could yell your head off about anything and no one bothers to tell on you” (Solzhenitsyn, 177). This is very different from Szpillman who literally works to live; if he refused labor or spoke any complaint in the name of a Nazi he would be shot. Following a minor mistake while bricklaying, Szpillman is quickly reprimanded with a harsh round of whippings (*The Pianist*). A Jewish account of life in Warsaw revealed the sickening horror that “Germans vented their rage upon the sick, bombing and setting fire to the hospital while it’s helpless patients lay inside” (Mark, 26). Szpillman’s sole motivations were to help aid in the defense against the German’s “Final Solution” policy and to live to see the day in which the Nazi regime would be crushed.

Both Szpillman and Shukhov strenuously work and suffer through rain and snow and are given barely enough food and basic necessities to survive such conditions. In order to survive they both find rebellion necessary. Szpillman transports guns from bags of potatoes to Jews in the ghetto to help set up a future act of resistance (*The Pianist*). Szpillman, like many other Jews in Warsaw, “decided that rather than passively waiting for transport to the death camps, they would make a statement by their own gallant but hopeless uprising against overwhelming odds” (Werner, 148). Shukhov also rebels in various ways for his own personal gain by hiding a spoon in his shoe and saving rations underneath his bed (Solzhenitsyn, 23).

Shukhov’s and Szpillman’s personalities prove to have many similarities through their separate near-death experiences in which they are deprived of freedoms and necessities. However, their differing struggles and motivations cause some variation in their personalities. Shukhov “had gotten out of the habit of worrying about the next day, or the next year, much less how to feed his family” (Solzhenitsyn, 47). He does sometimes offer his help to other prisoners but he mentions that he only does this because he will receive a favor in return. He remarks after lending a fellow prisoner a hand that “now Caesar owed him for this too” (Solzhenitsyn, 183). He also describes the overall positive outcome of his day based strictly upon what happened to him (Solzhenitsyn, 202).

Szpillman shows a more thankful personality. In *The Pianist*, he is fighting not only for his own survival, but also for the common good of Jewish people. He expresses his gratitude towards anyone who helps him because he knows they are fighting for the same cause while risking their lives for no direct benefit of their own. He thanks every visitor that helps him get by in hiding. When a Nazi soldier Wilm Hosenfeld not only lets him live but provides him with food, he is shocked and comforted to know that even some Nazi’s are willing to risk their own lives to seek refuge and aid for Jews just like himself. He thanks him repeatedly and even makes a great effort to locate Hosenfeld after he is freed from the Warsaw ghetto to thank him for saving his life.

Both men prove to be very cunning and resourceful; in order to survive in their circumstances these qualities are more than necessary. Shukhov makes a knife himself (Solzhenitsyn, 182), and he constantly worries about the bread he has hidden but is reassured by the fact that “he’d sewn it in his mattress” (Solzhenitsyn, 43). Szpillman in his circumstances is forced to hide his body. He becomes very good at living in hiding and being constantly on the run from various basements to apartments and storage units. Szpillman also proves his wit when he is concealing guns sent in potato sacs from other Jews (*The Pianist*).

In the ending of both *The Pianist* and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, both Szpillman and Shukhov experience positivity. For Szpillman, his happiness is primarily based on the fact that Jews collectively are no longer faced with an unchecked German oppression. The goal that had motivated him all along was now a successful triumph of the past. For Shukhov, his satisfaction was centered on his own well-being. He commented that “nothing had spoiled the day and it had been almost happy” (Solzhenitsyn, 203), despite the fact that his fellow gang member Fetyukov had just returned from a beating “hunched up with blood on his lips” (Solzhenitsyn, 181). He is happy merely because he had made it through the day relatively unscathed and had won his own daily fight for survival in the prison war camp. Shukhov’s selfish motivations cause him to rejoice in satisfaction while completely disregarding the fact that people were beaten to death and shot that day.

Overall, Wladislaw Szpillman and Ivan Denisovich Shukhov prove to be comparable in that their lives are a daily struggle for survival. However, their differing motivations and environments shed light upon very contrasting ways of thinking and acting. Shukhov’s self-centered motivations cause a more internal and personal struggle, while Szpillman perseveres through his fight more collectively in the hope of surviving alongside the entire remaining race of Jews.

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