

My father intended to write about all the extraordinary phenomena that characterized Norillag and how the prisoners and other inhabitants of that isolated and forgotten edge of the world coped with them. He was a witness and I, who took up the task of telling his story, was only a researcher relying on the experience of others like him. Could I present the whole picture in all of its ugliness?

The story of Ivan Denisovich illustrates how prisoners were forced to work despite the freezing temperatures. When laying bricks, they had to move quickly and work fast because the mortar would freeze and become unusable. It was cruel and inhumane but true: in open-air temperatures below freezing, the only way to stay alive and not freeze to death was to keep moving and work hard, with your hands in mittens that hardly kept your fingers from freezing and your feet in boots that were often so old and worn that they couldn't prevent the snow from getting in between your toes. Only when the temperature dropped below 50 (that is, -50° Centigrade) and visibility was blocked by blizzard were the prisoners exempted from working outdoors. But that wasn't an unmitigated blessing for them. Since transportation was difficult in such conditions, food supplies couldn't reach the camp and the kitchen couldn't deliver meals. Besides, the prisoners were forced to do chores and indoor repair work, and to work on Sunday to make up for their "day off." Ultimately, the workload and the length of the