Episode 839: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and the Horrors of the Soviet System

Guest: Margo Caulfield

WOODS: There are a lot of people who write books with a younger audience in mind who think they're good at it, and they're not but you don't have the heart to tell them. But not only is this — first of all, an adult can enjoy this book, because I enjoyed it and I learned things about Solzhenitsyn reading this book. But it's actually beautifully laid out. A lot of times when I get a book like this it's really clunky and awful, but I like the fonts, the font choices. I like the photographs. I like the pullout quotes and the facts. It's beautiful. It is so well done. I can't think of any way to improve on it, and I say that as somebody who's kind of a snob when it comes to publishing. So just the appearance of this is absolutely excellent, and the information is great.

Again, another thing about some children's books, especially when they're non-fiction, is that the writer thinks the children will share their enthusiasm for the subject. But it doesn't always happen. But this I am absolutely going to sit down with my kids and read this to them. And as I say, I would say up through pre-teen, but really even an adult can learn something about a man you would think people would know more about and would be mentioned more, and yet is not.

So let's start off with how it is you came to write this book, because you're not really in this field primarily.

CAULFIELD: That's correct. One of the things we do with our historical society — and we are a very small town. There's only about 1,200 of us, and our historical society is small. We have a very giant history, however.

WOODS: Tell us what town it is and what's the historical society.

CAULFIELD: Sure. This is Cavendish, Vermont. We're sort of south-central Vermont. The closest ski area for those of you that ski is Okemo Mountain. It's about five minutes from us. We are definitely located in the Green Mountains. We have very heavy snowfalls, which Solzhenitsyn would have identified with, being similar to Russia. Glorious four seasons. Not only are we the home to Solzhenitsyn when he was in exile for almost 18 years here; we also boast Phineas Gage, who was the person that had a tamping rod go through his head in 1848 and sparked the whole introduction of the understanding of the brain and the field of brain injuries. So there are these strange intersections between many of these different people.

But we run a very strong outreach program to our kids in the community. We run programs in school; we run programs for homeschoolers. And I happened to be working on a World War II project about veterans with our homeschoolers, and one of the children, Isabel Gross, who would be in the equivalent to the third grade, was horrified by the story. She grows up in America; she hears all the time parents talk about politics, the president, town manager, whoever it may be. This is commonplace. So when we explained how he was writing letters, using code words about his concerns about Stalin, that he's arrested on the front lines, he's a decorated war hero, she was horrified. She couldn't move beyond it. She was so traumatized by it that they could do this. She kept on saying, "It's not fair; it's not fair."

Now, this little girl happens to know Solzhenitsyn's grandson, because he was friends with her brother. So we got out picture books. And after that experience, I said, you know, if it was a book, she would see this was one chapter in this very amazing man's life, and I had all these other ideas of things I wanted to do around Solzhenitsyn. That became very important to me, because we quickly saw that when kids did come to the museum and they did see these pictures of him, she was not the only child with that reaction, which makes me feel hopeful for the next generation. And I wanted them to see it was a book. I wanted them to see it was one chapter in an amazing life.

And I want to tell you that the look of this book squarely belongs to Julia Gignoux, who did the layout, who is just amazing. We certainly had lots of conversations. I was very clear. I wanted it bright. I wanted it vibrant. I did not want the stereotypical idea of dark, heavy Russian. That is not at all what he was like. I wanted it to be appealing to all eyes. And truthfully, the book would not be half as good as it is if the Solzhenitsyn family had not shared those photographs. We would have never had access to them. Some of these photographs have never been seen in the West, so we were thrilled to have that. I spent many, many hours looking at videos, and thankfully Ignat and Stepan, his sons, had done marvelous translations.

I at one point had wanted to just scrap the whole book and see if I could tell the story just using his writing. So wherever possible I wanted to infuse his words; I wanted people to understand that this man's depth of writing was so spectacular. And whether it's an interview, an essay — I happen to love his prose poems — I wanted that all to come through in the book. And while we knew that this would be designed for children, the goal was it's for everybody. And if it was a first opportunity to really be introduced to this writer, all the better.

WOODS: Now, of course, we could start, as the book does, with his childhood and just go chronologically, but in the interest of time I want to start exactly from the moment he gets in trouble. A lot of people know Solzhenitsyn was in the gulag, but I think some of them are not entirely sure how he got there.

CAULFIELD: Well, he started corresponding during the war. When he went into that war, he certainly believed in the communist movement and Lenin and so forth. But as the war progressed and as he began to see things and as he began to understand things, he became less enamored, and he started to correspond with a friend, and he used a code word, sort of like "the mustached one," for Stalin. And being the times the way they were and what they did, they confiscated all of his writings that he was doing while he was in the war — so it was his journals, his personal correspondence,

etc. And as he said, when he went in for what we would call a monkey trial, they have all of his writings piled up. And this is used to basically say, Okay, eight years of prison and then permanent exile.

And for a writer, can you imagine sitting there — Here is all this time, work, and energy that you put into your war diaries, your war correspondence, that is all destroyed. It's gone. Fortunately, this is a guy that had this — My father was a journalist, so I grew up with the understanding of what is involved in being a journalist, and I certainly learned to write from my father. He just had this amazing memory, and he had this ability to talk to people to get this information and to research, which is really a very strong skill that a journalist needs. He was pretty amazing.

And so while he was in the camp system, he was able to use these techniques. For example, one of the things he did was he had a rosary carved, and every bead was a chapter and that's how he would remember the chapters of what he was writing. And he would scribble little notes and stick them in places. And then when he got so sick and when he was pretty sure he was going to die, here he is taking these notes and scrambling and rolling them up and sticking them in empty champagne bottles and burying them. He didn't know if he'd ever get back to see them, but he wanted to leave the legacy. He didn't want it to be what happened when he was arrested during the war.

WOODS: Even when he wound up in exile — because as you say, he was sentenced to exile afterward — he ends up in Kazakhstan, and you note in the book he writes his 9,000-word poem that he simply repeats and repeats and repeats in his own mind until he's memorized it, because although he's allowed to use pen and paper, he can't be sure that he really can do any writing that won't be confiscated.

CAULFIELD: That's absolutely correct. I mean, the level of suspicion and fear that he had to live under there was tremendous. And he's sick. That's the other thing. I mean, I think everybody goes, Well, yeah, he had cancer at these various points, but as someone who has spent a career in health care, this was a man that was really sick. He thought — They had told him, You have literally maybe three weeks to live. To have that kind of foresight — And as an old man, after he went back to Russia, he writes this wonderful prose poem where he compares what it was like to be 34 and thinking you were going to die in three weeks from a tumor and what it was like to be an old man and have heart disease where you didn't know if that heart attack was going to come today or tomorrow. Fascinating stuff, fascinating stuff.

WOODS: What is the book that comes out of — I'm sure everybody knows — but comes out of his time in the gulag, and what picture does it paint of that experience?

CAULFIELD: Well, the first piece that comes to mind, which is really a novella, is *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, and he did think of that book while he was in there. That to me, if he had written nothing else, that was such an incredibly brilliant book, that it had such a profound impact on me as a young person — You know, I grew up, I was part of that Baby Boom generation, where we heard these stories from not only Holocaust survivors, but parents and grandparents who were in the war and so forth and so on. So I was always fascinated by resiliency, how people survived. And I didn't

know then, but it would go on to play a big part in what I've done in health care. And he totally, totally captures that. And if I can read the last little piece of that chapter, the last part of that book — can I do that? Would that be okay?

WOODS: Yeah, please do. Yeah, sure.

CAULFIELD: This is the very end of the book, and now the prisoner is lying in bed. And he says, "He'd had many strokes of luck that day: they hadn't put him in the cells; they hadn't sent his squad to the settlement; he'd swiped a bowl of kasha at dinner; he squad leader had fixed the rates well; he'd built a wall and enjoyed doing it; he'd smuggled that bit of hacksaw blade through; he'd earned a favor from Tsezar that evening; he'd bought that tobacco. And he hadn't fallen ill. He got over it. A day without a dark cloud. Almost a happy day."

And I would interject here, this book was written 55 years ago. Today we talk to people who are depressed about how at the end of their day, to count three things that were good about that day. Now, I've read much more. He completely understood what it was and how to survive this incredibly difficult ordeal. He understood mindfulness, which we talk about all the time now. But he really lived that during that prison experience. But then because he's Solzhenitsyn, he gives this final twist at the book. "Almost a happy day. There were three thousand six hundred and fifty-three days like that in his stretch. From the first clang of the rail to the last clang of the rail. Three thousand six hundred and fifty-three days. The three extra days were for leap years."

So you see that this individual to survive this experience has got to live and hold onto that for quite a stretch, for quite a stretch. And he did. And he did. And I think it is such — you know, people ask me sometimes — they'll say so-and-so has cancer; how do they survive it or how do they deal with it or how do they deal with that. And I say, Well, if you have a short period, go read *One Day in the Life*. You'll understand how people really can deal with really extreme difficulties in their life and overcome them, because this was one day to tell an eight-year story. And I think it's a brilliant book.

Obviously *One Day*, you know *The Gulag Archipelago* people have read. He's certainly written other things about that. But as a first read I think that's a good one. And of course my frustration is that I don't read Russian and my friends that do assure me that I'm only reading this at one layer because there are so many incredible layers that this is written on and the beauty of how he's combined words to create new words of new meanings and new ideas — I'm sorry I don't have that, but still, even at this level there is so much he's imparting, which is terrific.

WOODS: All right, there's a lot more to talk about, because I want to get to his exile and then his sort of return and then his exile again — I mean, his life is just unbelievable. Let's first thank our sponsor.

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All right, so he completes his sentence. He's sent into exile. He's allowed to function, more or less, but he can't go farther than 30 miles from where he lives. And —

CAULFIELD: Well, that's once he's in exile. The first part of it, the first eight years, he split from actually being in a camp where he is actually doing hard labor. You know, he talks about how he can pour concrete and so forth. And part of that, he was also in a specialized camp, where he was there because his background, his education was in math and physics, and the government wanted him to work for them. There he had a little more flexibility. He could run some classes to help the other people there. But then he was sent to exile in Kazakhstan, where he was a teacher. And that's where he became sick for the second time, and then he went and was in a cancer ward — unbelievable that he survived this bout of cancer, thanks to radiation therapy and an experimental treatment. And then he is finally freed, and he can go back, and he can write. And then in 1962, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is published and his life changes again.

WOODS: Well, my plan was to — I wanted to mention that Khrushchev comes along; it becomes possible to talk about the worst enormities under Stalin, so that makes it possible to think of Solzhenitsyn as not necessarily an enemy of the state anymore. But then something happens to him in the 1970s. So he's able to come back, but then he has to be exiled again. So what happens?

CAULFIELD: Well, Khrushchev obviously — Ignat, in one of his speeches — Ignat is Solzhenitsyn's middle son — said, Worst mistake Khrushchev ever made: letting them publish *One Day in the Life*. But then Khrushchev is out of power, and so this little bit of fresh air that was breathed in by that is now closed again. The Cold War is back on. And now he is really saying, you know, I'm going to release — What happened after he wrote *One Day in the Life* is people started coming to them. They told the stories to him of their own experiences in the gulag or of family members that were taken. His research happened just because people started coming to them, and then he started looking for that.

And then that book was smuggled out of Russia. People were certainly reading it. At his memorial that we had in town for him when he died, a number of people came, and they all described how — those that came from Soviet Bloc countries described how they would hide in the bathroom and read on tissue-paper-thin pieces of paper that were stained, torn, etc. They would read these pirated copies called Samizdat, and they would read these books. But this book about the gulag is smuggled out of Russia and it's printed in France, and now the world knows. Now the world really knows the full details of what was going on.

And you know, in that book, he really goes back, and he's starting to tie this into Lenin, the work camps. And the rest of the world in the '30s is in abject poverty — you know, you had the Depression — and they're forging ahead over there. Well, they're able to forge ahead because you had these really horrendous labor camps that were just dreadful.

So he tells this story, and as soon as that is published, he pretty much knows that they're going to want him out of there one way or another. Are they going to try to kill him, or are they going to exile him? How are we to deal with that? And if you read *The Oak and the Calf*, which is sort of his autobiography up until he gets to the United States — it doesn't cover the United States period — he certainly talks about how he and his wife are preparing for this; they have these young children. They are preparing

for this eventuality. There was an attempt made on his life. He survives that. But then they come in, and they take him away.

And you read in his book how he's like, you know, when you are young you believe you are going to stand up and you can stand up because you are physically capable of doing that, but when you are much older — and now this guy's in his 50s — he had a blood pressure that I'm going, Did they miswrite these numbers in this book? Because his blood pressure was off the charts. And here now, all of the things that he thought he could do, how he wouldn't stand up, how he would do this, you know, it's not the same as when he was arrested the first time. Things were very different. And obviously they weren't — You know, he didn't know what was really going to happen. He knew he had — I think at some level — Obviously they knew that if they killed him the entire West was watching, and that wouldn't necessarily be a politically astute thing to do.

WOODS: Well, help me with the chronology here. How do we order his being awarded the Nobel prize? He doesn't go to accept the prize until a little bit later. Where is his second exile in those years?

CAULFIELD: Sure, in 1970 when he's awarded the Nobel prize, his wife, Natalia, is pregnant. He wants his child to be born in Russia. He wants his child to be born in his homeland, and he knows that if he goes to accept that prize, they might not let him back in. And he still wants his child to be born in Russia. So you see that conflict here. He is actually exiled in 1974, and he ends up first going to Germany, and then he ends up in Zurich. And he's in Zurich, and as both his son and his wife have talked about, they were just inundated constantly by people, and he couldn't write. He felt that he had written for so long; he just wanted to be quiet, and he wanted quiet in a way that he could not have in Zurich.

So he knew he was going to have to come to the West, and the question was: Canada or the United States? And his first thought was Canada. And he went to Montreal, and he took a train and he did some talks there, and then he took a train from Montreal to the West Coast. Ended up going down to the Hoover Center at Stanford and then spending time in California and New York and Washington, D.C., etc. The comparison between Canada and the United States for him was striking. He wanted a dynamic, forward-thinking — he wanted a level of dynamics that for him was not there in Canada, but he did find it in the United States. And having found it in the United States, he was very clear that as much as he could enjoy maybe being in New York for a day or two, he could not do the writing that he wanted to do, which was to write *The Red Wheel*.

And so he chose our lovely town. He did buy the property sight unseen. But what is interesting is Cavendish and its surrounding towns had mills and shoddy factories and so forth, and in the early 1900s there was a number of these mill owners and factory owners who went over to places like Minsk, and we did end up having — we do have strong Russian communities in this area. So for example, within 20 minutes of our town, there are two Russian Orthodox churches. Small town, but a very heavy Russian presence. And so he settled on our town and was very clear from the beginning that he wanted his privacy. And our town very much honored that.

Our town has been always the place that sanctuary was granted. It was why our first settlers came here. They wanted to practice their beliefs in the way they wanted them done. They had a level and gift of sanctuary. We have a very strong abolitionist history. 1806, we had a free black man here that owned property. He was a Revolutionary War vet. We didn't have to have safe houses, because the community was a safe community. The patterolle wasn't going to come into this area.

And true to his nature, Solzhenitsyn comes and he extends his gift of sanctuary that we've given him, he then extends that to other people. And that to me is one of the real beauties of our town. It's a wonderful piece of our history that we do get the gift of sanctuary and we give that.

WOODS: I'd like to read a passage from the book. I'm on page 62. This is a portion of what Solzhenitsyn said at the town meeting after he arrived. He says, "In all my life, I have never had any definite permanent place to live, much less my own home. Not knowing the conditions of Soviet life, you can barely imagine that people in the Soviet Union are not allowed to live where they choose." And then he says, "Finally the Soviet authorities would no longer tolerate me at all and deported me from the USSR. It so happened that among you in Cavendish, Vermont, I was able to find my first home and my first permanent residence. I am no fan of big cities with their bustling way of life, but I like very much your simple way of life. I like the landscape that surrounds you, and I like very much your climate with its long, snowy winters, which remind me of Russia."

And then he becomes more grave. He says — and these are just excerpts — "Russian is to Soviet as man is to disease. We do not call someone afflicted with cancer 'cancer' or someone with the plague 'plague'" — So in other words, don't call me a Soviet — "for we understand that their disease, their severe trial, is not their fault." And then he ends by saying, "The communist system is a disease, a plague that has been spreading across the earth for many years already, and it is impossible to predict what peoples will yet be forced to experience this disease firsthand. My people, the Russians, have been suffering from it for 60 years already. They long to be healed. And the day will come when they are indeed healed of this Soviet disease. On that day, I will thank you for being good friends and neighbors and will go back to my homeland."

Very interesting, but I also want to read one of your paragraphs because of the interesting photograph on the next page. You write, "The people of Cavendish left Aleksandr alone and protected him from outsiders who wanted to bother him. The owner of the local store hung a sign that said, 'No service for shirtless or shoeless customers, and no directions to the Solzhenitsyn home.'" And you can see that sign on the outside of the building in this photograph. I love that.

CAULFIELD: [laughing] Jill would be very pleased to hear that. What is very, very interesting is that the store where that sign hung is still very much in existence. Today it's called both the Cavendish General Store and Jill's Place, and Jill is still in the position of not giving directions to the Solzhenitsyn home. We still do not give those directions out, because that is still the family home, and his son and his family live there. We don't give that direction out still to this day. And they still want you to wear shoes and shirts in that store.

WOODS: But I feel sure he moved back to Russia at some point. Is that wrong?

CAULFIELD: He did. He actually — he restricted his citizenship, as was his wife and his mother-in-law, and that was reinstated. He could have gone back in '92, but he chose to wait until '94 because he wanted to finish writing his book. He was working on *The Red Wheel*. And he goes back in '94. There is a wonderful film — we do have a copy of it. It used to be available online in small increments, but it was taken down. The BBC did it. It was called *The Homecoming*, and it follows him from leaving his home here in Cavendish, Vermont to on the plane, and then this long train ride he took back into Moscow and all the stops along the way that he made.

And in some places, he was absolutely the most revered, respected individual that you could imagine, and they were so thrilled to have him back on his soil. And you see him so thrilled. And then you see him in other situations where he's talking in these towns and the people are furious with him. "Our kids would come home from school, and they belonged to Pioneer Club, and they would do this, this, this, and this. Now they come home and they watch television. Where are the Pioneer Clubs? Where are these?"

And of course he's taking notes the whole time, and I'm looking at this, and I'm going, Why are you beating him up? You want a Boys and Girls Club? Go out and start one. Come on, what's the problem? And as my husband always says to me, This was a country, this generation didn't understand that grassroots-up works. They were so used to top-down. And I'm reminded of that a lot. And people come from all over the world to visit us and to see what we have in our collections and to talk to us, and they all tell a similar story of people didn't know how to handle, people don't understand that they do have this ability to make a difference.

And this was a big message for Solzhenitsyn. You as an individual can make a huge difference. You need to understand that you operate within a community. You cannot just be so self-absorbed that you ignore the compassion of someone else, and there has to be this balance, but you can make a difference. If you do not like this, you have to work to make that change. And that was a very hard concept for these people to grasp, and you could clearly see it. And I even get that message given to me by even younger people that are coming over and are saying he took away the heyday of when Russia was great. We were the shining stare in the Soviet firmament, and it is very interesting times.

And you know, he was fascinated by the American — he was fascinated by our town, I think, because I've seen some of the stuff he had written about us, how we didn't wait for government to tell us how to do things. We had town meetings. We bash it through. We don't always agree. We work on it. We vote on it. You don't like it? You come back in and you try and change it again — which, if you know anything about town meetings, is very much part of what Vermont is about. And in many ways, many people in Vermont really viewed Solzhenitsyn as a real Vermonter. He was one of us. You hear that again and again and again, and people really feel that he got that aspect of who we were, that we wanted things —

WOODS: Well, I want to add to this that getting a sense of Solzhenitsyn's thought and the depth and richness of it is a whole other topic. I mean, his life alone, even apart

from his writings, is fascinating and very much worth talking about. But then when you get into the substance of what he had to say, it's also quite profound. So I'm going to link on the show notes page, which will be TomWoods.com/839, not only to your book, *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: The Writer Who Changed History*, but I'm also going to link to his famous commencement address at Harvard from June 1978, which, when I was an undergraduate there, we had much less interesting commencement speeches. So every year in our student publication that we had, we would reprint the Solzhenitsyn speech saying, Look, if you're bored stiff listening to this canned speech written by somebody else, you can read a real speech actually written by the guy who delivered it if that's more interesting to you. So I'm going to link to that.

CAULFIELD: And it's interesting. That is an interesting topic, because people often ask me about that Harvard address. And if you can also link to the Cavendish Historical Society's blog, there's a sidebar with a lot of links on Solzhenitsyn, and one of them is Ignat speaking in 2014 for the Vermont Humanities on the writing of *The Red Wheel*, life in Cavendish, that type of thing, and in that he really addresses a lot of aspects of what his father — people asked, "What did your father really think of Americans?" And it's a fascinating video to watch, and I think better than I go into any detail about explaining that. It is really worth it to hear what Ignat has to say on that.

Remember, he was in Zurich, where a lot of Europeans don't think highly of Americans. We're not cultured. We're not this or we're not that. And so when Solzhenitsyn came here, he was not, you know, "What is this America place? You know, I've heard all these stories." So when he came here, like many immigrants, there is many examples of people — and freedom. And he wondered, Were they strong enough? Would they fight for their freedom again? And I think when he made that speech — I believe it was 1978; is that correct?

WOODS: Yeah, 1978. Yep.

CAULFIELD: Yeah, in '78. As Ignat talks about, he said, You know, Pope John Paul, first pope elected from behind the Iron Curtain, was elected in 1978. Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979. Reagan was elected in 1981. And this sort of trifecta really worked to bring down the Iron Curtain. And he wasn't — I think in some ways he probably didn't fully grasp: Americans are going to fight for their freedom. They absolutely are going to stand up for it. And I think about it; in 2011, which was the 250th anniversary of our town, and I like to think at some level Solzhenitsyn knew that his grandson was one of the kids that carried the flag in the parade, you know? I think that's just a really nice piece of history.

But just prior to that event, our town was completely decimated by Irene, the storm. We were an isolated town. We had to shelter for ten days. You want to know what people are made of, you put them in a situation like that. And there is no doubt in my mind — and I don't think there would have been any doubt in his mind — of the people in the community he lived in or what Americans are capable of. It was an amazing thing to witness, because we were stranded, and absolutely everybody rose to the challenge, whether it was to put back a road on their own — Nobody waited. We didn't wait for FEMA. We didn't wait for anybody. This had to be taken care of. People knew how to do it. Everybody rolled up their sleeves. And that would have been important to him, I think.

WOODS: Well, that's an interesting story also. I want to —

CAULFIELD: And I would like to say that now that Amazon is charging a 6% tax, at least in our state, if people want to buy the book directly, the most benefit to us as the historical society is if they order it directly from the historical society or from Create Space, which is what we used. Not to say Amazon — we don't care how you order. Ultimately we want you to read the book. But in terms of every dime that's made from this book goes into our Solzhenitsyn initiative — and 2018 is coming up, and we've got a lot of things that we want to be able to do, so this book — And we're always happy to come and talk about what we're working on. We don't care where it is. iPod works, whatever.

WOODS: All right, well, I'll make sure we link to a good way for people to get this book. It'll be up at TomWoods.com/839. You also have a website, which is TheWriterWhoChangedHistory.com, and I'll link to that site on our show notes page as well. Well, thanks so much for your time. I hope we're able to get the word out. I hope people listening to this will get this book and help spread the word. This is a small historical society that's done a big, big job that we should all be grateful for, and they don't have access to the mass media; they have access to the people listening to this episode right now. So please do what you can for them, because it's an outstanding book that has my highest endorsement. Thanks so much for your time, Margo.

CAULFIELD: Okay, thank you, Tom.