

# SOLZHENITSYN

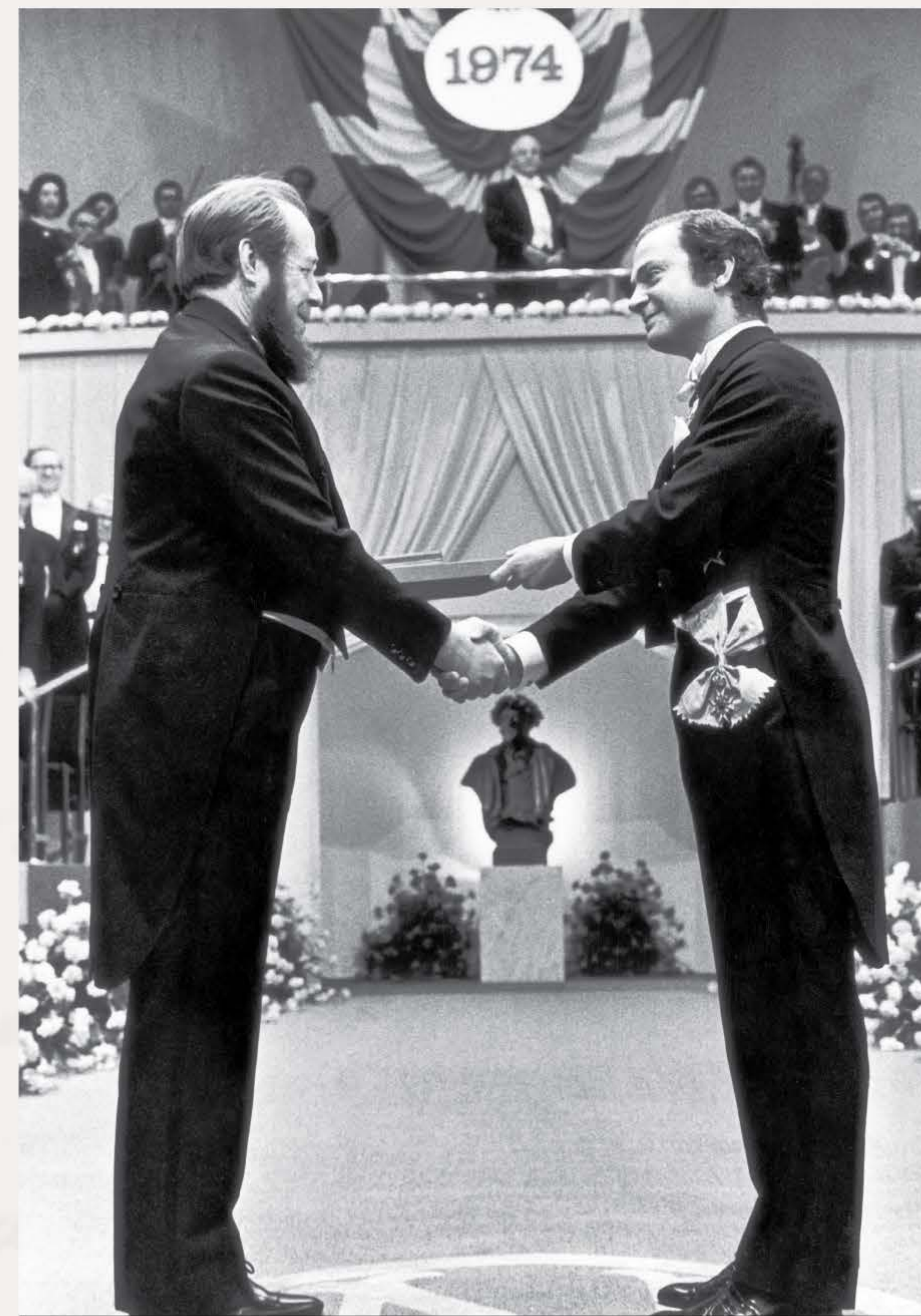
## IN VERMONT

### EXILE

Born in 1918 in Kislovodsk, Russia, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was a writer and historian whose work raised awareness of the Soviet Gulag system of forced labor camps. A critic of the Soviet Union and of communism, he received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1970. He did not go to Stockholm to accept his Nobel Prize, however, because he feared he would not be able to return to the Soviet Union.

Solzhenitsyn was, in fact, exiled from the Soviet Union in 1974 and lived as an expatriate for twenty years. For most of that time, he lived in Cavendish, Vermont. Only one of his works, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, was published in the USSR; the rest, including *Cancer Ward* and *The Gulag Archipelago*, were published in the West.

He returned to Russia in 1994 after the dissolution of the USSR, living in a dacha outside Moscow with his wife Natalia. He passed away in 2008.



Nobel Prize Award Ceremony, Stockholm, December 10, 1974. Credit: Jan Collisio.



"The man who is for the moment the most famous person in the western world." — The Times [London], February 15, 1974



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## WHY VERMONT?

When Solzhenitsyn and family were exiled, they initially went to Zurich, Switzerland. It became quickly apparent that if he was going to achieve his goals, and write what he felt would be his epic work, *The Red Wheel*, he needed privacy. He also needed access to university archives (Dartmouth College and their interlibrary loan was essential to his research), remoteness, security, and four seasons: “a proper winter.”

*“My husband initially had wanted to settle in Canada, and we traveled all over Canada in 1975....Happily for the whole family I was able to convince my husband, and he became convinced himself, that although Canada is a most beautiful country, it is somewhat like a pillow. It is a little too boring, and it is too far removed both geographically and in terms of culture. So together we decided that the best place for us to settle would be New England, particularly northern New England.*

*...In the same year [Aleksandr]...travelled around New England for two weeks, around Vermont and New Hampshire-Canadian border. He drove around with a Canadian friend of ours, of Russian descent, who is a young man and an architect, Alexis Vinogradov. He found the actual land that was for sale...he built the house for us, in which we were very happy.”*

– Natalia Solzhenitsyn



Playing with Yermolai and Igor in the yard in Zurich, Spring 1974





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## WHAT WAS LIFE IN VERMONT LIKE?

*“First of all, we worked always. And this is in no way a good quote, or an exaggeration. This is really a fact. Literally when we were not working, we were eating or sleeping....My husband, my mother and myself, we worked together always. But in addition to that as soon as children became somewhat grown, and this happened very early, we were able to include them in our work, through many different facets and ways. For example, very early on, we were able to ask them and to show them how to do certain elementary research in encyclopedias and books, and so on, find necessary quotes and such.”*

– Natalia

The Solzhenitsyn family immersed themselves in both Vermont and American life in many ways. They loved sports – Natalia and her mother Ekaterina were both accomplished athletes – and were particularly fond of basketball and the Boston Celtics. They enjoyed grilling outside in the summer, were involved in church, and frequently traveled down to Brattleboro, VT or up to Hanover, NH for concerts.

They worked hard to maintain their ties to Russia as well – the children all learned Russian as their first language. Though they attended Cavendish schools, their parents gave them additional lessons in Russian geography, literature, and history.

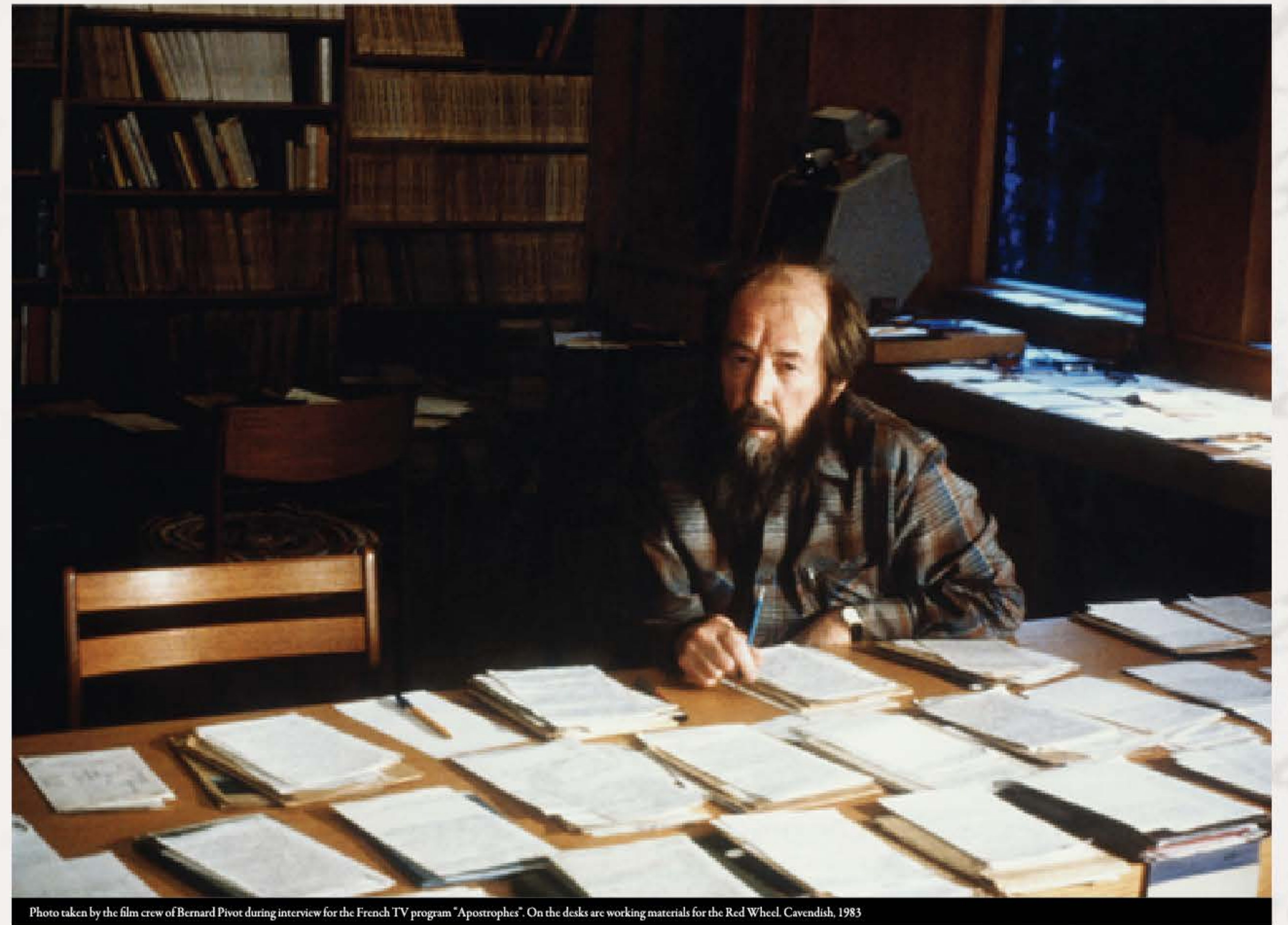


Photo taken by the film crew of Bernard Pivot during interview for the French TV program 'Apostrophes'. On the desks are working materials for the Red Wheel, Cavendish, 1983



Checking on Yermolai's work progress, Cavendish, mid-1980s





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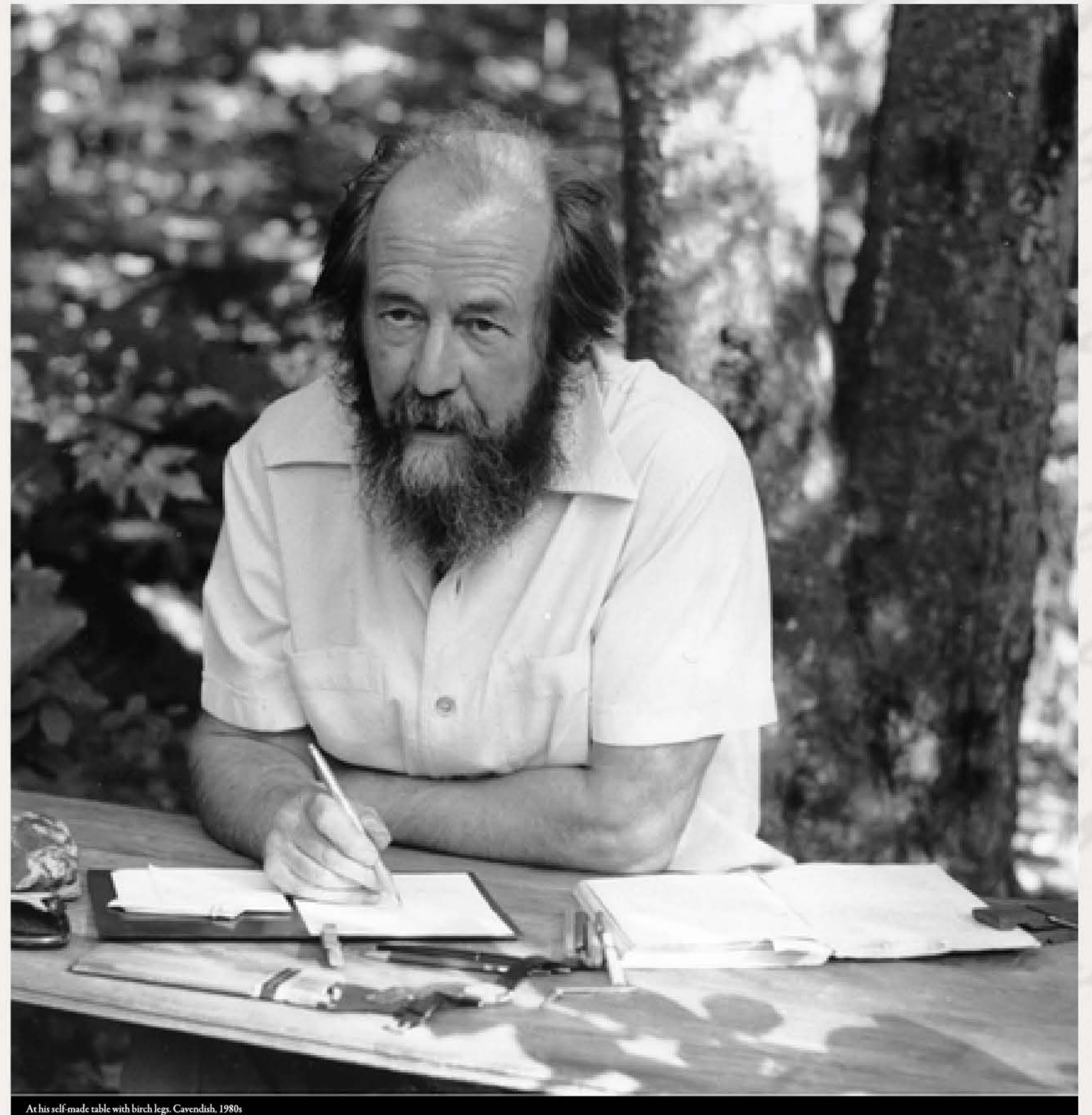
## CAVENDISH & COMMUNITY

*“We were received warmly. Right from the beginning, and basically right up until today we receive many letters from Vermonters. Very different kinds of letters. But they are always warm and very interested. ..My husband tries to answer as many as possible, but, of course, it is not possible to answer them all. We have to say that we never received any nasty or unpleasant letters from any Vermonters that we can remember....People were always extremely warm to us, they were considerate, friendly, open.” – Natalia*

The residents honored the request to respect the family’s privacy and it became a game for some of the younger members of the community to give directions, which would take them in the opposite direction. The Cavendish General Store owner became famous for his sign “No Restrooms, No Bare Feet, No Directions to the Solzhenitsyn Home.”

*“We respected him. That prison business was terrible. We don’t talk about it. You don’t talk about these things. [Visitors would] up drive here with their city tires and get stuck in the mud. My boys would tow them out, and charge them a helluva price for it.”*

*– John Stearns, former Cavendish Selectman*



At his self-made table with birch legs, Cavendish, 1980s



From left to right: Natalia, Aleksandr, Yermolai, Ignat, Cavendish, September 1987



VERMONT HISTORY

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## FAREWELL

During his time in Cavendish, Solzhenitsyn was able to achieve what he had first conceived of as a youth – an in-depth study of the Russian Revolution. *The Red Wheel* ultimately reached 10 volumes. Solzhenitsyn felt it was his most important work and it wouldn't have been possible without the privacy and security provided to him by the people of Cavendish and the dedication of his wife and family.

*Citizens of Cavendish, our dear neighbors,*

*At town meeting seventeen years ago I told you about my exile and explained the necessary steps, which I took to ensure a calm working environment, without the burden of constant visitors.*

*You were very understanding; you forgave my unusual way of life, and even took it upon yourselves to protect my privacy. For this, I have been grateful throughout all these years; and today, as my stay here comes to an end, I thank you. Your kindness and cooperation helped to create the best possible conditions for my work.*

*The eighteen years which I have spent here have been the most productive of my life. I have written absolutely everything I wanted to. I offer today those of my books that have been translated into English to the town library.*

*Our children grew up and went to school here, alongside your children. For them, Vermont is home. Indeed, our whole family has come to feel at home among you. Exile is always difficult, and yet I could not imagine a better place to live, and wait, and wait for my return home than Cavendish.*

- Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, February 28, 1994, on the occasion of his return to Russia

