

# Books of The Times

## As the Clock Nears Midnight

By THOMAS LASK

**THE CANCER WARD.** By Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn. Translated by Rebecca Frank. 615 pages. Dial. \$8.95. 576 pages. Bantam paperback. \$1.25.

**CANCER WARD.** By Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn. Translated by Nicholas Bethell and David Burg. 560 pages. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$10.

**B**ECAUSE of the restrictive conditions surrounding the publication, really the lack of publication, of the work of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in the Soviet Union, Americans are now the recipients of two translations of the banned writer's, third novel, "Cancer Ward" (one title to cover both editions listed above). It is

regrettable that the publishers could not have agreed on one version. For to a layman who does not read Russian, the translations differ mainly in detail. Names have slightly different forms: Demka and Nelly in the Dial version become Dyomka and Nelya in the other. "Solid geometry" becomes "stereometry," "golden-hair" "goldilocks" and so on. Occasionally the differences are greater. "Honeybee" in the Rebecca Frank text is turned into "teddy bear" in the others and "moral socialism" into "ethical socialism." But since the first term is used as one of endearment and the second is clear from the context, the differences don't appear to be meaningful. Idioms are sometimes troublesome. "We never broke bread together, did we?" in one book is changed into "You and I haven't drunk from the same bowl of soup." The English of Rebecca Frank is simpler in construction and it rings more harmoniously on the ear—on my ear anyway.



Farrar

A. Solzhenitsyn

### Author Scores Censorship

The Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition does offer additional material, however. Footnotes identify Russian authors, events and phrases that may be lost on the non-Russian reader. The book also contains two letters by the author demanding the abolition of censorship and the immediate publication of his work, as well as a transcript from the proceedings of a session of the Soviet Writers Secretariat held on Sept. 22, 1967, which records an exchange of charges between Mr. Solzhenitsyn, his friends and detractors.

The transcript is valuable in providing a glimpse of the kind of give and take that must go on there: a mixture of literary

criticism and ideology. Time and again the discussion comes down to whether Mr. Solzhenitsyn was right or wrong in drawing a character as he did or in detailing an incident or in making references to public events and figures. Even those who wanted "Cancer Ward" to be published insisted that changes would have to be made. It was never assumed that the author had the right to be wrong or see things his way.

Some of the objections were made on literary grounds, but they were seldom separated from non-literary matters such as whether an early play by the author still expressed his mind and how his books, banned in Russia, managed to be published in the West. The rebuttals to the contents of his books were interesting. "True, you have suffered," one man told him. "But so have others." And, of course, it is always enlightening to hear the voice of an author, in this case prickly and demanding, speaking for himself and not through the personae of his characters. But the rough ground the novel covered to get here is ancillary to the quality of the work itself.

"Cancer Ward," as you might have guessed, is about such a ward in a hospital in Soviet Asia and it tells in a series of vignettes and encounters of the treatment of a handful of patients and their involvement with the hospital staff. Cancer in this book takes many shapes and the treatment is gone into at length. It appears to be an accurate description of hospital conditions in a regional capital of the Soviet Union.

### Effects of an Illness

The patients include a cowardly provincial official who hides behind the authority of the state, an outspoken maverick who has served in the camps, an agronomist haunted by his cowardice during the purges and after, young men whose futures are blasted by illness, surgeons, radiologists and medical students. The patients come in cocky; slowly they are subdued and altered by the inexorable progress of the disease. Some manage a respite; others leave to die; a few are cured. But the fact of the illness hangs over them all.

There are passages of power and beauty in "Cancer Ward," but the general effect is one of diffuseness. It lacks the tension, the anguish of "The First Circle." It is a novel that pulls in two directions. On the one hand it keeps suggesting parallels and bridges to the purges, the cruelties and the labor camps. But after the reader adjusts himself to see the novel in this guise, it shifts to probe the minds and hearts of men under sentence of death.

It is never quite a political essay, never quite a religious study of how man must live. A profound sadness hovers over the book and we know that it comes from one who has seen life reduced to its lowest common denominator. But the experiences that brought the author to this pass, in this book at least, are not shared but asserted.