

b e t w e e n

s h a d e s

of

g r a y

RUTA SEPETYS

PHILOMEL BOOKS
An Imprint of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

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An Imprint of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

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Published simultaneously in Canada.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Sepetys, Ruta. *Between shades of gray* / Ruta Sepetys. p. cm.
Summary: In 1941, fifteen-year-old Lina, her mother, and brother are pulled from their Lithuanian
home by Soviet guards and sent to Siberia, where her father is sentenced to death in a prison camp
while she fights for her life, vowing to honor her family and the thousands like hers by burying her
story in a jar on Lithuanian soil. Based on the author's family, includes a historical note.
1. Lithuania—History—Soviet occupation, 1940-1941—Juvenile fiction. [1. Lithuania—History—
Soviet occupation, 1940-1941—Fiction. 2. Labor camps—Fiction. 3. Survival—Fiction. 4. Siberia
(Russia)—History—20th century—Fiction. 5. Soviet Union—History—1925-1953—Fiction.]
I. Title. PZ7.S47957Be 2011 [Fic]—dc22 2009050092

eISBN : 978-1-101-47615-4

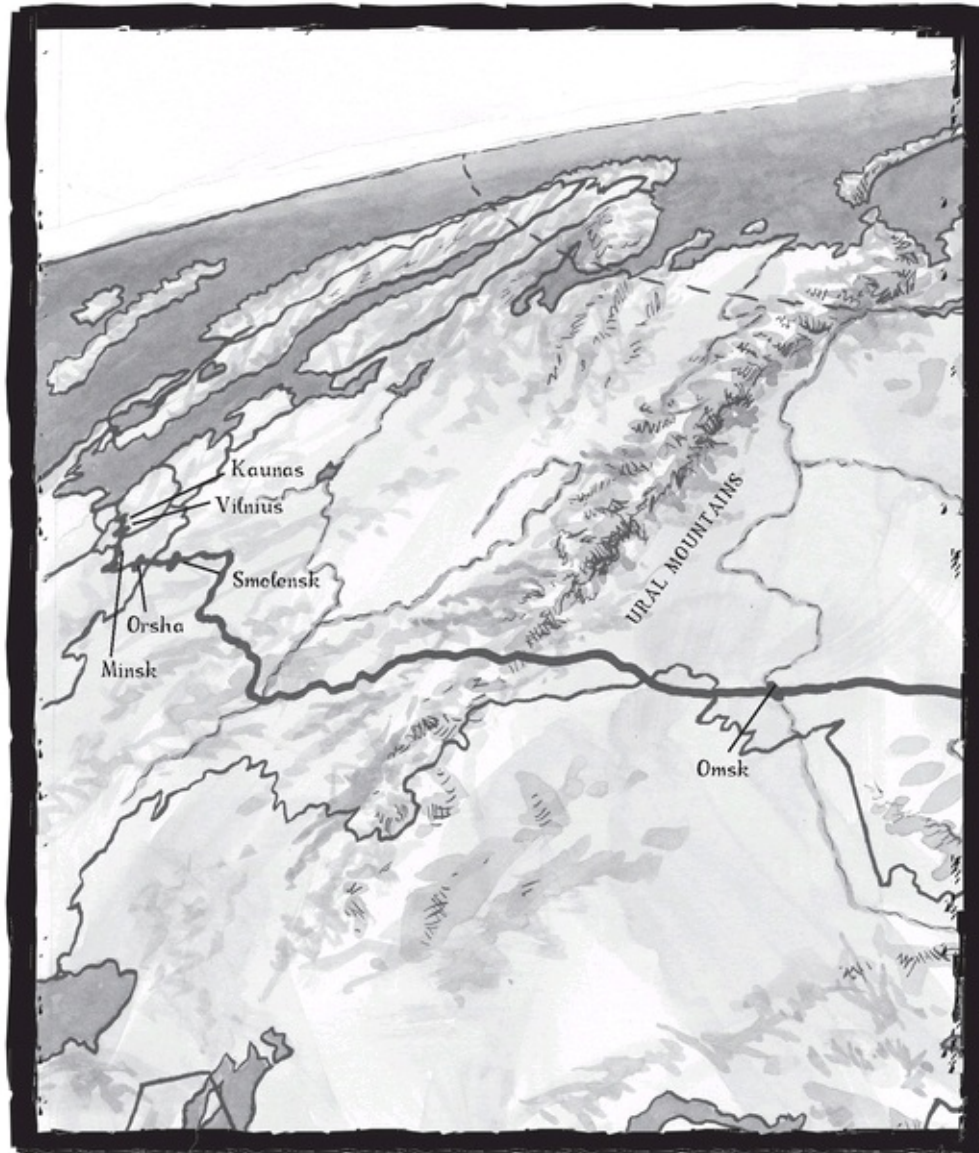
<http://us.penguin.com>

In memory of Jonas Šepetys





This map is intended to convey the great distance Lina and her family traveled. It is not meant to accurately represent all country borders.



Day 1 Kaunas, Lithuania
Day 3 Vilnius, Lithuania
Day 4 Minsk, Belarus
Day 5 Orsha, Belarus

Day 6 Smolensk, Russia
Day 21 Cross the Ural Mountains
Day 30 Omsk, Siberia
Day 42 Altai Labor Camp

A TIMELINE



Day 306	Altai Labor Camp	Day 350	Ust Kust, Siberia
Day 313	Biysk, Siberia	Day 380	Yakutsk, Siberia
Day 319	Makarov Camp	Day 410	Cross the Arctic Circle
Day 320	Banks of Angara River	Day 440	Trofimovsk, North Pole

This map is intended to convey the great distance Lina and her family traveled. It is not meant to accurately represent all locations.

thieves and prostitutes

THEY TOOK ME IN MY NIGHTGOWN.

Thinking back, the signs were there—family photos burned in the fireplace, Mother sewing her buttons, silver and jewelry into the lining of her coat late at night, and Papa not returning from work. My younger brother, Jonas, was asking questions. I asked questions, too, but perhaps I refused to acknowledge the signs. Only later did I realize that Mother and Father intended we escape. We did not escape.

We were taken.

June 14, 1941. I had changed into my nightgown and settled in at my desk to write my cousin Joana a letter. I opened a new ivory writing tablet and a case of pens and pencils, a gift from my aunt for my fifteenth birthday.

The evening breeze floated through the open window over my desk, waltzing the curtain from side to side. I could smell the lily of the valley that Mother and I had planted two years ago. *Dear Joana.*

It wasn't a knocking. It was an urgent booming that made me jump in my chair. Fists pounded on our front door. No one stirred inside the house. I left my desk and peered out into the hallway. My mother stood flat against the wall facing our framed map of Lithuania, her eyes closed and her face pulled with an anxiety I had never seen. She was praying.

"Mother," said Jonas, only one of his eyes visible through the crack in his door, "are you going to open it? It sounds as if they might break it down."

Mother's head turned to see both Jonas and me peering out of our rooms. She attempted a forced smile. "Yes, darling. I will open the door. I won't let anyone break down our door."

The heels of her shoes echoed down the wooden floor of the hallway and her long, thin skirt swayed about her ankles. Mother was elegant and beautiful, stunning in fact, with an unusually wide smile that lit up everything around her. I was fortunate to have Mother's honey-colored hair and her bright blue eyes. Jonas had her smile.

Loud voices thundered from the foyer.

"NKVD!" whispered Jonas, growing pale. "Tadas said they took his neighbors away in a truck. They're arresting people."

"No. Not here," I replied. The Soviet secret police had no business at our house. I walked down the hallway to listen and peeked around the corner. Jonas was right. Three NKVD officers had Mother encircled. They wore blue hats with a red border and a gold star above the brim. A tall officer had our passports in his hand.

"We need more time. We'll be ready in the morning," Mother said.

"Twenty minutes—or you won't live to see morning," said the officer.

"Please, lower your voice. I have children," whispered Mother.

"Twenty minutes," the officer barked. He threw his burning cigarette onto our clean living room floor and ground it into the wood with his boot.

We were about to become cigarettes.

WERE WE BEING ARRESTED? Where was Papa? I ran to my room. A loaf of fresh bread had appeared on my windowsill, a large wad of rubles tucked under the edge. Mother arrived at the door with Jonas clinging close behind her.

“But Mother, where are we going? What have we done?” he asked.

“It’s a misunderstanding. Lina, are you listening? We must move quickly and pack all that is useful but not necessarily dear to us. Do you understand? Lina! Clothes and shoes must be our priority. Try to fit all that you can into one suitcase.” Mother looked toward the window. She quickly slid the bread and money onto the desk and snapped the curtains shut. “Promise me that if anyone tries to help you, you will ignore them. We will resolve this ourselves. We must not pull family or friends into this confusion, do you understand? Even if someone calls out to you, you must not respond.”

“Are we being arrested?” began Jonas.

“Promise me!”

“I promise,” said Jonas softly. “But where is Papa?”

Mother paused, her eyes blinking quickly. “He will be meeting us. We have twenty minutes. Gather your things. Now!”

My bedroom began to spin. Mother’s voice echoed inside my head. “Now. Now!” What was happening? The sound of my ten-year-old brother running about his room pulled a cord within my consciousness. I yanked my suitcase from the closet and opened it on my bed.

Exactly a year before, the Soviets had begun moving troops over the borders into the country. Then in August, Lithuania was officially annexed into the Soviet Union. When I complained at the dinner table, Papa yelled at me and told me to never, ever say anything derogatory about the Soviets. He sent me to my room. I didn’t say anything out loud after that. But I thought about it a lot.

“Shoes, Jonas, extra socks, a coat!” I heard Mother yell down the hallway. I took our family photo from the shelf and placed the gold frame faceup in the bottom of the empty suitcase. The faces stared back at me, happy, unaware. It was Easter two years before. Grandma was still alive. If we really were going to jail, I wanted to take her with me. But we couldn’t be going to jail. We had done nothing wrong.

Slams and bangs popped throughout the house.

“Lina,” Mother said, rushing into the room, her arms loaded. “Hurry!” She threw open my closet and drawers, frantically throwing things, shoving things into my suitcase.

“Mother, I can’t find my sketchbook. Where is it?” I said, panicked.

“I don’t know. We’ll buy a new one. Pack your clothes. Hurry!”

Jonas ran into my room. He was dressed for school in his uniform and little tie, holding his book bag. His blond hair was combed neatly over to the side.

“I’m ready, Mother,” he said, his voice trembling.

“N-no!” Mother stammered, choking on the word when she saw Jonas dressed for academy. She pulled in an uneven breath and lowered her voice. “No, sweetheart, your suitcase. Come with me.” She grabbed him by the arm and ran down to his room. “Lina, put on shoes and socks. Hurry!” She threw my summer raincoat at me. I pulled it on.

I put on my sandals and grabbed two books, hair ribbons and my hairbrush. Where was my

sketchbook? I took the writing tablet, the case of pens and pencils and the bundle of rubles off my desk and placed them amongst the heap of items we had thrown into my case. I snapped the latches closed and rushed out of the room, the curtains blowing, flapping over the loaf of fresh bread still sitting on my desk.

I saw my reflection in the glass door of the bakery and paused a moment. I had a dab of green paint on my chin. I scraped it off and pushed on the door. A bell tinkled overhead. The shop was warm and smelled of yeast.

“Lina, so good to see you.” The woman rushed to the counter to assist me. “What may I help you with?”

Did I know her? “I’m sorry, I don’t—”

“My husband is a professor at the university. He works for your father,” she said. “I’ve seen you in town with your parents.”

I nodded. “My mother asked me to pick up a loaf of bread,” I said.

“Of course,” said the woman, scurrying behind the counter. She wrapped a plump loaf in brown paper and handed it over to me. When I held out the money, she shook her head.

“Please,” whispered the woman. “We could never repay you as it is.”

“I don’t understand.” I reached toward her with the coins. She ignored me.

The bell jingled. Someone entered the shop. “Give your parents our very best regards,” said the woman, moving to assist the other customer.

Later that night I asked Papa about the bread.

“That was very kind of her, but unnecessary,” he said.

“But what did you do?” I asked him.

“Nothing, Lina. Have you finished your homework?”

“But you must have done something to deserve free bread,” I pressed.

“I don’t deserve anything. You stand for what is right, Lina, without the expectation of gratitude or reward. Now, off to your homework.”

MOTHER PACKED AN EQUALLY large suitcase for Jonas. It dwarfed his small, thin frame and he had to carry it with both hands, bending backward to lift it off the floor. He didn't complain of the weight or ask for help.

The sound of breaking glass and china wailed through the house in quick intervals. We found our mother in the dining room, smashing all of her best crystal and china on the floor. Her face glistened with sweat, and her golden ringlets fell loose over her eyes.

"Mama, no!" cried Jonas, running toward the broken shards that littered the floor.

I pulled him back before he could touch the glass. "Mother, why are you breaking your beautiful things?" I asked.

She stopped and stared at the china cup in her hand. "Because I love them so much." She threw the cup to the floor, not even pausing to see it break before reaching for another.

Jonas began to cry.

"Don't cry, darling. We'll get much nicer things."

The door burst open and three NKVD officers entered our house carrying rifles with bayonets. "What happened here?" demanded a tall officer, surveying the damage.

"It was an accident," Mother replied calmly.

"You have destroyed Soviet property," he bellowed.

Jonas pulled his suitcase close, fearful that any minute it, too, might become Soviet property.

Mother looked in the foyer mirror to affix her loose curls and put on her hat. The NKVD officer slammed her in the shoulder with the butt of his rifle, throwing her face-first into the mirror.

"Bourgeois pigs, always wasting time. You won't need that hat," he scoffed.

Mother righted and steadied herself, smoothing her skirt and adjusting her hat. "Pardon me," she said flatly to the officer before fixing her curls again and sliding her pearl hatpin into place.

Pardon me? Is that really what she said? These men burst into our home at night, slam her into the mirror—and she asks them to pardon *her*? Then she reached for it, the long gray coat, and suddenly I understood. She was playing the Soviet officers like a careful hand of cards, not quite sure what might be dealt next. I saw her in my mind, sewing jewelry, papers, silver, and other valuables into the coat under the lining.

"I have to use the bathroom," I announced, trying to divert the attention from my mother and the coat.

"You have thirty seconds."

I shut the bathroom door and caught sight of my face in the mirror. I had no idea how quickly it was to change, to fade. If I had, I would have stared at my reflection, memorizing it. It was the last time I would look into a real mirror for more than a decade.

THE STREETLAMPS HAD been turned off. It was nearly black in the road. The officers marched behind us, forcing us to keep pace with them. I saw Mrs. Raskunas peer out of her curtains. The moment she saw me looking, she disappeared. Mother nudged at my arm, which meant that I should keep my head down. Jonas was having a hard time carrying his suitcase. It was banging against his shins.

“*Davai!*” commanded an officer. Hurry, always hurry.

We marched into the intersection of the street, toward a large dark object. It was a truck, surrounded by more NKVD. As we approached the rear of the vehicle, I saw people sitting inside on their luggage.

“Boost me up before they do,” Mother whispered quickly, not wanting an officer to touch her coat. I did as she asked. The officers pushed Jonas up. He fell on his face, his luggage thrown on top of him. I made it without falling, but when I stood up, a woman looked at me and clasped her hand to her mouth.

“Lina, dear. Button your coat,” instructed Mother. I looked down and saw my flowered nightgown. In the rush and search for my sketchbook, I had forgotten to change. I also saw a tall, wiry woman with a pointy nose looking at Jonas. Miss Grybas. She was a spinster teacher from school, one of the strict ones. I recognized a few others: the librarian, the owner of a nearby hotel, and several men I had seen Papa speaking with on the street.

We were all on the list. I didn’t know what the list was, only that we were on it. Apparently so were the other fifteen people sitting with us. The back gate of the truck slammed shut. A low moan came from a bald man in front of me.

“We’re all going to die,” he said slowly. “We will surely die.”

“Nonsense!” said Mother quickly.

“But we will,” he insisted. “This is the end.”

The truck began to move, jerking forward quickly, throwing people off their seats. The bald man suddenly scrambled up, climbed the inside wall of the truck, and jumped out. He smashed onto the pavement, letting out a roar of pain like an animal caught in a trap. People in the truck screamed. The tires screeched to a halt and the officers leapt out. They opened the back gate, and I saw the man writhing in pain on the ground. They lifted him up and hurled his crumpled body back into the truck. One of his legs looked mangled. Jonas buried his face in Mother’s sleeve. I slipped my hand into his. He was shaking. My vision blurred. I squeezed my eyes shut, then opened them. The truck jerked forward, moving once again.

“NO!” the man wailed, holding his leg.

The truck stopped in front of the hospital. Everyone seemed relieved that they would tend to the bald man’s injuries. But they did not. They were waiting. A woman who was also on the list was giving birth to a baby. As soon as the umbilical cord was cut, they would both be thrown into the truck.

NEARLY FOUR HOURS PASSED. We sat in the dark in front of the hospital, unable to leave the vehicle. Other trucks passed, some with people covered in large restraining nets.

The streets began to buzz with activity. “We were early,” one of the men commented to Mother. He looked at his watch. “It’s nearing three now.”

The bald man, lying on his back, turned his face toward Jonas. “Boy, put your hands over my mouth and pinch my nose. Don’t let go.”

“He will do nothing of the sort,” said Mother, pulling Jonas close.

“Foolish woman. Don’t you realize this is just the beginning? We have a chance now to die with dignity.”

“Elena!” A voice hissed from the street. I saw Mother’s cousin Regina hiding in the shadows.

“Have you any relief now that you’re on your back?” Mother asked the bald man.

“Elena!” The voice appeared again, a little louder.

“Mother, I think she’s calling you,” I whispered, eyeing the NKVD smoking on the other side of the truck.

“She’s not calling me—she’s a crazy woman,” Mother said loudly. “Be on your way and leave us alone,” she yelled.

“But Elena, I—”

Mother turned her head and pretended she was deep in conversation with me, completely ignoring her cousin. A small bundle bounced into the bed of the truck near the bald man. His hand grabbed for it greedily.

“And you speak of dignity, sir?” said Mother. She snapped the bundle out of his hands and put it under her legs. I wondered what was in the package. How could Mother call her own cousin “a crazy woman”? Regina had taken a great risk to find her.

“You are the wife of Kostas Vilkas, provost at the university?” asked a man in a suit sitting down from us. Mother nodded, wringing her hands.

I watched as Mother twisted her palms.

Murmurs rose and fell in the dining room. The men had been sitting for hours. “Sweetheart, take them the fresh pot of coffee,” said Mother.

I walked to the edge of the dining room. A cloud of cigarette smoke hovered over the table, held captive by the closed windows and drapes.

“Repatriate, if they can get away with it,” said my father, stopping abruptly when he saw me in the doorway.

“Would anyone like more coffee?” I asked, holding up the sterling pot.

Some men looked down. Someone coughed.

“Lina, you’re turning into quite a young lady,” said a friend of my father’s from the university.

“And I hear that you’re a very talented artist.”

“Indeed, she is!” said Papa. “She has a very unique style. And she’s exceptionally smart,” he added with a wink.

“So she takes after her mother then,” joked one of the men. Everyone laughed.

“Tell me, Lina,” said the man who wrote for the newspaper, “what do you think of this new

Lithuania?"

~~"Well," interrupted my father quickly. "That's not really conversation for a young girl, now, is it?"~~

"It will be conversation for everyone, Kostas, young and old," said the journalist. "Besides," he said, smiling, "it's not as if I'd print it in the paper."

Papa shifted in his chair.

"What do I think of the Soviets' annexation?" I paused, avoiding eye contact with my father. "I think Josef Stalin is a bully. I think we should push his troops out of Lithuania. They shouldn't be allowed to come and take what they please and—"

"That's enough, Lina. Leave the pot of coffee and join your mother in the kitchen."

"But it's true!" I pressed. "It's not right."

"Enough!" said my father.

I returned to the kitchen, stopping short to eavesdrop.

"Don't encourage her, Vladas. The girl is so headstrong, it scares me to death," said Papa.

"Well," replied the journalist, "now we see how she takes after her father, don't we? You've raised a real partisan, Kostas."

Papa was silent. The gathering ended and the men left the house at alternating intervals, some through the front door and some through the back.

"The university?" said the bald man, still wincing with pain. "Oh, well, he's long gone then."

My stomach contracted like someone had punched me. Jonas turned a desperate face to Mother.

"Actually, I work at the bank and I saw your father just this afternoon," said a man, smiling at Jonas. I knew he was lying. Mother gave the man a grateful nod.

"Saw him on his way to the grave then," said the surly bald man.

I glared at him, wondering how much glue it would take to keep his mouth shut.

"I am a stamp collector. A simple stamp collector and they're delivering me to my death because I correspond internationally with other collectors. A university man would certainly be near the top of the list for—"

"Shut up!" I blurted.

"Lina!" said Mother. "You must apologize immediately. This poor gentleman is in terrible pain; he doesn't know what he is saying."

"I know exactly what I am saying," the man replied, staring at me.

The hospital doors opened and a great cry erupted from within. An NKVD officer dragged a barefoot woman in a bloodied hospital gown down the steps. "My baby! Please don't hurt my baby!" she screamed. Another officer walked out, carrying a swaddled bundle. A doctor came running, grabbing at the officer.

"Please, you cannot take the newborn. It won't survive!" yelled the doctor. "Sir, I beg you. Please!"

The officer turned to the doctor and kicked the heel of his boot into the doctor's kneecap.

They lifted the woman into the truck. Mother and Miss Grybas scrambled to make room for her lying next to the bald man. The baby was handed up.

"Lina, please," Mother said, passing the pink child to me. I held the bundle and instantly felt the warmth of its little body penetrating through my coat.

"Oh God, please, my baby!" cried the woman, looking up at me.

The child let out a soft cry and its tiny fists pummeled the air. Its fight for life had begun.

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