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UNDISCOVERED DUBINGIAI

Between Shades of Gray

by Ruta Sepetys (Rūta Šepetys)

Philomel Books (Penguin Group), New York, 2011

Book review by James M. Boubonis

RŪTA ŠEPETYS HAS SPUN AN EXCELLENT STORY about Lina, a Kaunas girl in her early teens whose family is arrested by the communist authorities in Soviet-occupied Lithuania and shipped to Siberia in forced exile. When the story begins, Lithuania is in the throes of the first Soviet occupation, with the arrival of Hitler's forces soon after. Unfortunately for Lina, her parents, her younger brother Jonas, and the many thousands of Lithuanian patriots suffering on the railroad boxcars for weeks, the German invasion came too late to disrupt the communists' plans for deportation.

The family, named Vilkas (Wolf), is cruelly manhandled throughout the novel by troops of the notorious NKVD. In Russian, NKVD is the acronym for the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, a euphemism for a paramilitary, secret police force whose job was to terrorize the population of the USSR (including nations forcibly absorbed such as Lithuania) with the aim of enforcing Stalinist doctrine and goals. In her Author's Note, Šepetys incorrectly implies that the KGB known later on for much the same social terrorism was formerly the NKVD.

The history of the Soviet spy/secret police agencies is not that simple; the division of the original NKVD, which became the KGB, was known by its Russian acronym of GUGB, which stood for the Russian equivalent of Main Directorate for State Security. The security forces in charge of the Gulag prison system, after creation of the KGB, became a different division altogether. There were several other divisions of intelligence and secret police agencies as well, each one hellbent on the annihilation of decent human society in the name of the glorious Socialist Soviet utopia.

In the railroad boxcars, the Lithuanians suffer the tortments of starvation, overcrowding, lice, and unsanitary conditions. They are never permitted, for weeks, to leave the train car and walk around, and are packed wall-to-wall in the dark, filthy cars. Each car, carrying over 40 people, is given one bucket of water and one bucket of cattle slop to

share per day. Excretion is performed through one hole in a corner of the car.

When any of them die due to the starvation and inhumane conditions, as many of them did, the dead bodies are removed once per day and unceremoniously flung aside the railroad tracks by the NKVD personnel. They are continually abused by the NKVD – verbally, physically, and sometimes sexually – and are constantly called pigs, Fascists, criminals, and whores. The “crimes” of these “Fascist pig criminals” are merely being any type of person considered dangerous by the paranoid Stalinist regime. In the case of Lina's father, it was his professorship at Kaunas University. He had never agitated the public against the Soviets, had never resisted them physically, and was keeping quiet for the sake of his family's safety. But he was not one of those educated people who favored the onset of Soviet rule in Lithuania, and therefore he was declared a criminal by the Stalinist thugs, the NKVD. So were

landowners, teachers, priests, journalists, military officers – anyone who could conceivably want to resist the communist takeover.

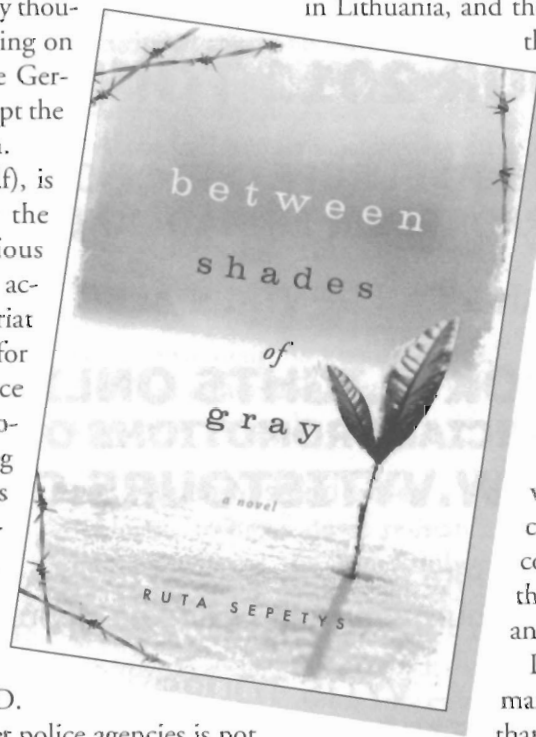
Lina, her mother, and her brother end their first long train journey at a *kolkhoz*, a collective farm, where they work as slaves for the Soviet Union. Eventually they are sent elsewhere to an even worse situation, where hunger and the sadistic cruelties of the NKVD are the least of their worries. The extreme cold of their new camp, north of the Arctic Circle, becomes their worst enemy, penetrating their flimsy huts and causing loss of life and limb to hypothermia and frostbite.

During Lina's pitiful life in exile, she managed to latch on to a few strengths that caused her to stay hopeful. One was

her considerable talent as an artist. Wherever she was, under whatever inhospitable conditions, she managed to find ways to continue drawing, using her art to record the story of her travails.

Another bright spot in her life is the indomitable courage and steadfast love of her mother, and through that example, Lina's tenderness toward her little brother Jonas. There also follows a love interest, as young Lina is attracted to a young man who is a fellow Lithuanian deportee.

Šepetys thoroughly researched the subject before writing her novel, making two trips to Lithuania during which she interviewed a number of survivors of the deportations of the Stalin era, visited historical sites and museums, and read background material on the Soviet occupations and the deportations. Everything the fictitious Lina suffered was



inflicted upon real Lithuanians in the 1940s through early 1950s. The experience of those most unfortunate ones sent to Lina's second labor camp is based on documented fact, and boggles the mind how any humans can be so thoroughly cruel toward other humans. The atrocities of the Soviet Gulag were every bit as horrifyingly cruel as those of the Third Reich's concentration camps. Hundreds of thousands of Lithuanians were mercilessly yanked from their homes, their families split, and sent to labor camps where the conditions were so inhumane that death was often welcomed as a mercy.

As the story is told by Lina in the first person, the vocabulary and the viewpoint is that of a young girl, and the ideal readers of this book are pre-teens to those in their mid-teens, though adults can appreciate it too – especially the dramatic developments at the end of the story, where the reader also discovers the significance of the book's title. My own 17-year-old Gabrielle found that she liked the book, though the word choice is rather simple and is a bit behind her reading level. She liked the choice of maps used at the beginning of the book, that they're not confusing. Gabrielle, an avid reader, thinks the book is a good choice for young readers interested in historical prose, and that it reminded her of a book she read about the Holocaust while she was in middle school.

It was rather logical that the talented Rūta Šepetys write

such a book. Her grandfather had been an officer in the pre-war Lithuanian Army, her father an immigrant from Lithuania who escaped the Stalinist massacres, deportations, and oppression with his family when a young boy. Her first inspiration to write the novel came to her when she visited a cousin in Lithuania and began learning more, firsthand, about life in Lithuania under Soviet rule. She has also said that she wrote the book "to honor the people of the Baltics and also to illustrate the power of love and patriotism."

The book is smartly designed, packaged in an attractive dust cover, pictured here, that juxtaposes the cold, severe images of snow and barbed wire with the hopeful image of a green sprig. Beneath the dust cover is an all-white hard-bound cover, the book filled with sturdy pages and set in a type font that is easy on the eyes. *Between Shades of Gray* will indeed make a fine gift for young readers, or even older ones interested in the subject matter. It is the first English-language novel for young readers that details the horrendous suffering of the many Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Finns, and others sent to the Soviet Gulag.

Between Shades of Gray is available at major bookstores (if yours doesn't have it, ask for it) or from Amazon.com. **LH**

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