

The Future Eyes of the Past **Ruta Sepetys • September 7, 2016 • ILB**

It's an honor to be at the 16th annual International Literature Festival of Berlin. I'm particularly thrilled to be taking part in the program for children and young adults. In the United States, I am considered a "crossover" author—"crossover" because my novels are read by readers across many age groups, from students to elderly adults.

I have written three historical novels. Much to my delight, my books are published in over 50 countries and 35 languages. That certainly would not be possible without my translators and foreign publishers. In many countries, my books are published only for adults, not teenagers. In Germany, however, it's the opposite. I am published for young readers in Germany and I am so happy about that. I feel enormous gratitude to my German publisher KönigsKinder, and the brilliant German translator of my novels, Henning Ahrens.

As a writer, I am drawn to underrepresented stories and history in hiding. I spend a lot of time pondering the question—why do some parts of history penetrate our collective consciousness while others remain hidden?

That question inspired my first novel, *Between Shades of Gray*, which shares the story of Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians deported to Siberia by Joseph Stalin. My interest in history also inspired my most recent novel, *Salt to the Sea*, which tells the story of the evacuation of East Prussia and the sinking of the German ship, MV Wilhelm Gustloff. In addition to generating questions, writing historical novels and studying the past has taught me many things, but perhaps most importantly, it has taught me that progress is possible.

I am the daughter of a Lithuanian father and a German American mother. My mother's family, my maternal grandfather, came from the Mecklenburg region of Germany. My father was born in Lithuania and fled in 1940, when he was four years old. He traveled through Poland and Austria and finally made it to Germany, where his family was allowed into a refugee camp. My father spent nine years in refugee camps—eight of those years in German refugee camps— before being allowed into the United States.

In the United States, growing up with a name like "Ruta Sepetys" presented some challenges and at times, even raised suspicion.

"So, what are you?" people would sometimes ask over the phone, prior to meeting me.

Through written correspondence some would inquire,
"Is a 'Ruta Sepetys' a man or a woman? Is 'Ruta Sepetys' your real name?"

As a young girl, it heightened my sensitivity to ethnicity and as a result, my Lithuanian heritage plays a large role in my identity. And now as an author, I've been traveling the world, meeting with readers and discussing interpretations of history. I quickly learned that the exact same text and story has a very different meaning for each reader, depending on the cultural or ethnic lens they are looking through. And of course there were many lenses at the end of World War II.

Estimates of displaced persons following World War II range from seven to fifteen million. As the daughter of a refugee, the narrative of displaced people has always interested me—especially the stories of the young children. What would it be like to leave everything

you've ever known and loved behind? How frightening for the children, innocent victims of combat and vengeful regimes, orphaned by war and atrocity and left with an inheritance of heartache and responsibility for events they had no role in causing. It was the plight of the young people, the children, that inspired me to write *Salt to the Sea*.

Most of you here are probably familiar with the history behind the novel. Perhaps some of you, or your family members, lived through it. *Salt to the Sea* tells the story of the evacuation through East Prussia and the enormous sea disaster—the sinking of MV Wilhelm Gustloff. The tragedy of the Titanic, the luxury leisure ship, is well known throughout the world. The Titanic sank in three hours and over fifteen hundred people perished. But neither the Titanic nor the Lusitania claims the title of single largest maritime loss of life. That title belongs to the Wilhelm Gustloff.

In January of 1945, as World War II was drawing to a close, the Red Army was advancing into East Prussia. Hitler forbid German civilians to evacuate. When it became clear to all that evacuation was the only option—for many it was too late.

A naval evacuation, Operation Hannibal, was organized and one of the ships used for the operation was a former KDF cruise ship, MV Wilhelm Gustloff. Capacity of the ship was approximately 1,400. All of the furniture was removed to create more space. When the Wilhelm Gustloff sailed on January 30th, 1945 some estimate that it was carrying over ten thousand people.

Just after 9:00 p.m. amidst a snowstorm on the Baltic Sea, the ship was torpedoed by a Soviet submarine.

Three torpedoes. Sixty minutes to sink.

It's reported that over nine thousand people lost their lives—including five thousand children. It's the single largest maritime disaster in history, yet many have never heard of it.

I spent years researching and writing the novel. I traveled to six countries tracking down stories. I consulted historians, academics, journalists, divers, survivors, and families of survivors and victims. I'm so grateful to the people who provided assistance, some of whom are here today. The Wilhelm Gustloff was a German ship, but during my research I discovered Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Croatians and others who were also on board—even reports of Dutch stowaways.

When I spoke to people about the evacuation and the sinking, their accounts differed, relative to their place of birth or experience. That's of course natural and understandable. I wanted to represent the different viewpoints and lenses in the novel, to show that even if an event is shared, every human being's interpretation is unique. So I created four characters, four young people, all hunted and haunted by tragedy, lies, and war: a Lithuanian nurse, an East Prussian artist, a Polish orphan, and a young German sailor.

Salt to the Sea is told in the alternating voices of these four young people. Their fates converge as they flee through East Prussia, arrive at the port, and desperately try to board the doomed ship.

When I began work on the novel several years ago, I had no way of knowing that when it was published, we would be amidst a refugee crisis. And as the daughter of a refugee, people often ask me for my thoughts. But like many, I am frustrated because I have more questions than answers. And again, my thoughts always return to the children.

Who is that small child running for his life? In the United States, we often see more of the media and very little of the refugees themselves. Some Americans are not familiar with the term “displaced person.” But when I see images of the children I ask—Who is that child running for his life? Who is that child who has lost family, country, home? Sixty-seven years ago that child, that refugee, was my father.

Last year, Pope Francis addressed the refugee crisis in his speech to US Congress. He stated, “We need to see their faces. We need to hear their stories.”

See their faces. How can we see their faces?

Through books and reading, stories and characters come alive. We see their faces. We share their pain. For three hundred pages, we walk beside them, feeling their fear. It doesn’t matter if it’s 1945 or present day, suddenly—through story— a statistic becomes a human being. Although some adults are familiar with the population displacement during World War II, I wanted to share the history with an important group of readers—young readers.

Young readers have a tremendous sense of justice. Young people ask difficult and sincere questions and demand honest answers. They deserve them. Young readers point out the flaws, the inequities, and they quickly see through façade. Young readers have a profound sense of emotional truth. If a teenager tells you that they are in love or that they are angry, believe them. Young people understand and experience the force of love intensely. A teen once shared this quote with me, “Love is giving someone the power to destroy you, but trusting them not to.”

Truth, justice, love, trust. The young generation will be the ones to preserve and carry fading stories into the future.

So, young readers in Germany and attendees here within the Young Adult section of the ILB: I am honored to write for you and I am honored to work with you. You are the future eyes of the past. You are the generation who sees the true faces. You are the ones who might wonder—what if a kid we are trying to deny possesses the exact qualities we need to make the world a safer place? You are asking the right questions. We need you in this conversation. You are the ones who may benefit from our good decisions, and you are certainly the ones who will suffer from bad decisions.

History allows us to examine decisions. Yes, it’s full of sadness, suffering, loss, and pain but it also shines light on hope, freedom, courage and the miraculous nature of the human spirit.

In that regard, all attendees of the ILB, young and old—you play a role in this. You are not just readers, you are lamplighters of compassion, knowledge and change. By sharing stories and discussing difficult history together, you are extending one of the most powerful gifts you have as human beings—empathy. Empathy, to tell someone: I know your story, I feel for you. The world has not forgotten you and we must do better.

When story and suffering are acknowledged, perhaps we can take a small step toward protecting and restoring human dignity. One small step. When I began this speech, I mentioned that writing historical fiction has taught me that progress is possible. Perhaps you’re wondering what I meant by that. My books have been used for several “All City”

reading programs in the United States. For those programs, the mayor of a city selects a book and the middle schools, high schools, universities, adult reading groups and even retirement communities, all read the same book. After a few months, the program ends with a community gathering in a theater, like this one.

My first novel, *Between Shades of Gray*, tells the story of Stalin's mass deportations of Baltic people to Siberia and it has been used for "All City" reading programs. When we gathered in the auditorium for the community event, twelve-year-old readers were discussing the history with people in their eighties, people who had experienced the war. And most importantly, readers who stood on opposing sides during the war had read the book and were discussing it together. I sat on stage and watched as people from The United States, Germany, Russia, Japan, Israel, and Lithuania shared insight, responsibility, and the common desire to protect and respect the dignity of mankind.

It occurred to me at that moment that history divided us, but through reading we are united in story, study, and remembrance. That is progress. That is the power of books. That is what we celebrate this week here at ILB.

We also celebrate and encourage thoughtful exchange. When a writer publishes a book and puts it out into the world, it then belongs to the readers. Whether you love a book or hate a book, you're right. That experience belongs to you. Your interpretation is more important than the author's explanation. Share and discuss the lens *you* look through.

The books featured here in Berlin this week are important, but not necessarily because of the authors who wrote them. They are important because they represent stories of countless souls who struggled, lived, suffered, loved, and maybe felt that the world had forgotten them.

I'm here in Berlin for my novel *Salt to the Sea*. I wrote the book but it's not my story. It's history's story. It belongs to the true witnesses, but when they are gone I hope readers will help the stories endure.

Some estimate that there were over ten thousand passengers on the Wilhelm Gustloff when it sank, including five thousand innocent children. And the Wilhelm Gustloff was not the only ship that sank. Goya, Steuben, Thielbeck, Cap Arcona and others also sank. Nearly thirty thousand people suffered horrific deaths at sea.

Each one had a story.

We know the villains' names because we teach the villains' names. But we don't always know the victims' names. What could we learn from their stories?

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you, to discuss difficult past, difficult present, to recognize those who have struggled and those who are struggling.

Progress is possible. Let's learn, grow, and create hope for a more just future together. Thank you.