

A Story to Tell

An Interview with Rūta Šepetys

by Jennifer Virškus

IT'S AMAZING HOW MANY OF us have these stories that intersect," says Rūta Šepetys, author of *Between Shades of Gray*, over a paper cup of Starbucks coffee in Montclair Village just outside of Oakland, California. She's here to promote her book, which came out in paperback last week, at A Great Good Place for Books, a local bookseller. Although I have come to interview her, she begins by asking me about *my* family's story—and we quickly discover we have a lot in common. Both of our grandfathers were officers in the Lithuanian army, both were engineers, and both settled in Michigan to work in the automobile industry. Telling similar family stories of fear, escape, and survival, we make each other teary-eyed.

We both have American mothers, and neither of us learned to speak Lithuanian at home. "We didn't grow up speaking Lithuanian in the house, and it's my greatest regret," says Šepetys. I tell her about the Lithuanian language immersion program I attended at Vilnius University. She is quickly excited—her personality is overwhelmingly positive—and starts to take down notes. Though she grew up in southeast Michigan, not far from Dainava, she never attended the popular summer camp, or Saturday School. "I didn't even know about it until I was older and my sister brought it up, she said, 'Do you know that there are all these great Lithuanian camps?' And it was like, 'Oh, no, what did we miss?'"

Despite her lack of exposure to Lithuanian culture outside her own home, Šepetys says she first sensed her Lithuanian identity in preschool. "They call roll—it started when I was



Rūta Šepetys.

about three or four years old—the teacher paused at the name, tried to pronounce the name, and then the teacher said, 'What are you?' Like I was an alien or something, and all the kids are sort of giggling, 'What are you? What are you?' And I said, 'I'm Lithuanian.'"

An hour and a half later, her media escort arrives and walks us around the corner. Rather than give a reading from the book—most visitors have already read it and are sitting patiently with their copies in their laps ready to be autographed—she opens up her presentation with an anecdote about working with a particularly snarky teenager who looked back at her and said, "What's *your* story, Rūta?"

She paused, briefly at a loss for an answer. Finally she said, "I'm Lithuanian."

The kid looked at her, "I don't even know what that is. What does that mean—*Lithuanian*?"

She replied, "I have a name that no one can pronounce, and I love herring." She says the kid was disgusted, but it forced Šepetys to think, "I'm Lithuanian, what *does*

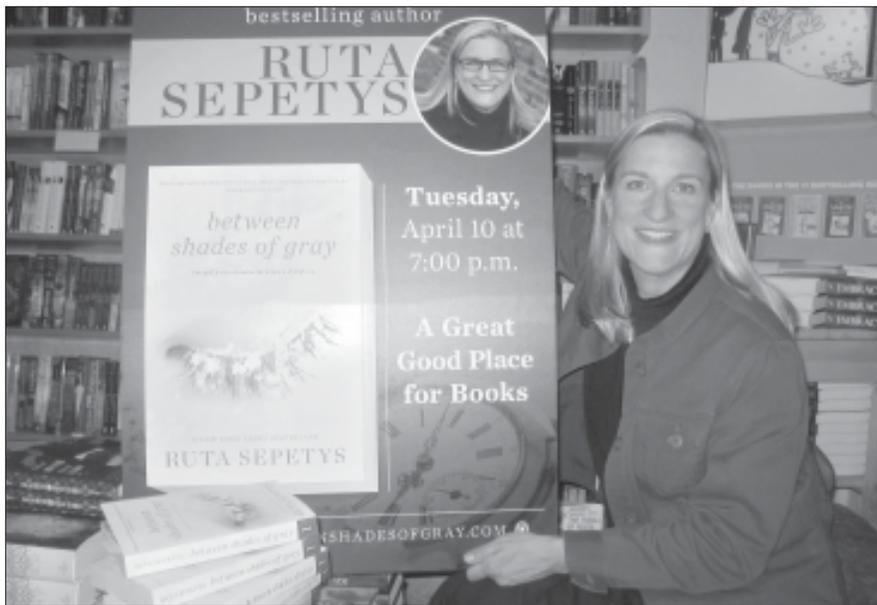
that mean?"

Šepetys went to Lithuania for the first time with her brother and met members of her extended family. She wanted to find photos of her father as a young boy; the family spent nine years in a displaced person's (DP) camp in Germany—her father essentially grew up there—and the family had no photos from that time. She said that Lithuania felt like home. "We felt so instantly comfortable there; we started thinking we needed to buy an apartment... [that Lithuania] is really where we belong." She described how, when she walked down Gedimino Prospektas in Vilnius, she could see the faces of her family members in the people passing by.

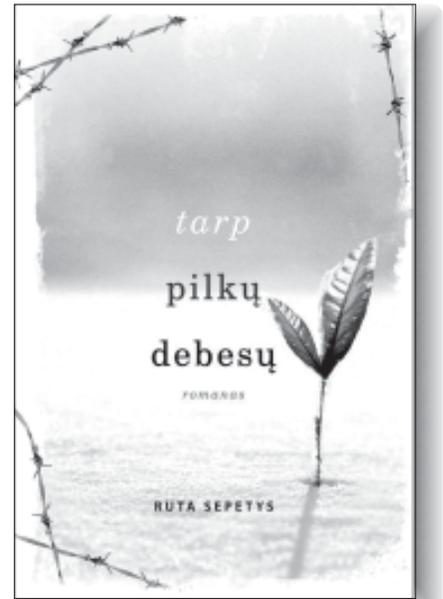
Before she went to Lithuania, she had no idea that the Soviet deportations to Siberia had affected her extended family. As an officer in the military, her grandfather was at risk of becoming a victim of Soviet conscription, but thanks to her grandmother's German heritage, they had the opportunity to repatriate to Germany. However, because her grandparents fled, her grandfather's family was put on the list to be deported to Siberia. To find out that perhaps the freedom she was born into came at the expense of someone else, further complicated her feelings about her own identity. She said she was ashamed that she'd had no idea that part of history had affected her own family. But she was also inspired.

"I thought, 'I have to do something. I want to write a book...' my friend Linas took me to the store and I bought the only book I could find in English, which was Dalia Grinkevičiūtė's book, *A Stolen Youth: A Stolen Homeland*. I read it on the plane home. It started right then. I started the book, and then I went back to do more research."

Šepetys had always wanted to be a writer, but she had no idea if her book would ever be published. "I thought



ABOVE: Rūta signing her books at the A Great Good Place For Books bookstore in Oakland, CA. ABOVE, RIGHT: Rūta's book translated and published in Lithuania.



the world needs to know... It was a purely personal time." She is part of a writing group near her home in Tennessee, and when she came back from Lithuania the first time, she told her group about the project. Her friend told her, "You can write this story; you're Rūta Šepetys!"

She says the process of writing the book really connected her with her heritage. Before going to Lithuania, she knew only what she could take from Lithuanian people she had met in the United States—that they were an extremely artistic people, which is why art plays such an important role in her characters' life. Through her research, Šepetys discovered how, in many ways, art was used not only to safeguard the culture, but to even save lives. Deportees used their work to both record their experiences, and pass messages on to others.

In front of eager fans at the bookstore, Šepetys addresses a question I had asked her earlier: "What was the most surprising discovery you made while writing the book?" Her answer is threefold. While she says she still holds grudges from high school, one woman told her, "Rūta, you're so silly. If I were to be angry or violent, I would be perpetuating the hatred that

took over with the Soviets. No, you have to break the cycle." While it wasn't true of everybody, she says the majority of people definitely did not carry hatred.

In terms of her immediate family, the surprise was that even her father was not familiar with what had happened to his family until he went back in 1991, and even then they didn't share the full details with him. Their freedom was still so fragile, and the fear—you didn't talk about what happened in Siberia—was still fresh.

The shocking discovery she made about herself, is that—as she claims—she's a coward. She took part in an experiment with a group of Latvian students who were making a documentary film and were going into a Soviet prison for an immersion experience. Rounds of laughter echo the room as she describes signing the liability waiver (which her husband begged her not to do) and happily went off to be locked in a gulag after a good night's sleep and a nice meal, never imagining that she would actually be hit, or spat at, or have her hair pulled. Upon entering the prison, they were lined up in a room and surrounded by guards, who immediately started beating the boys. "I

was terrified. Imagine the terror that's rising up in me as they near the end of the line. I wanted to run, I wanted to leave, and I couldn't." After screaming at her in Russian, a guard ripped off her necklace—"I was wearing jewelry to a prison, you see how prepared I was?"—threw her to the ground and started kicking her. After only seconds of being beaten, she says, a switch flipped inside her, and she realized that she was someone who she didn't think she was. She was not the woman who carried an injured man on her back for five kilometers through the snow; she was the person who pretended not to hear a Latvian boy who lay on the ground pleading with her for help. Instead, she scurried away in a desperate mode of self-preservation.

Before going into the prison, not knowing if she was claustrophobic or not, she had mostly been worried about solitary confinement. By the time she was thrown into solitary, she says, it was bliss. No one was yelling at her, no one was beating her. She was put into a closet with two dark figures. As she stood there, crying, she heard through the blackness, "Psst, American lady..." She felt a hand on her shoulder, and the voice said, "Don't worry, I'll help you."



TOP: At the Vilnius Book Fair with Lithuanian Minister of Defense, Rasa Juknevičienė and US Ambassador Anne Derse. ABOVE: Presentation of the book at the Lithuanian Ministry of Defense in Vilnius.

Though she says it would be so disrespectful to say that she experienced anything close to what it was really like during a Siberian winter in a Soviet gulag, in her own way, she learned how those bonds were formed. How, in the camps, she says, the I and the Me disappeared and became We.

Šepetyš explains that her goal for the book intersects with why she decided to write it as young adult fiction; she wanted to get into schools and libraries, and young adult material is fed directly into scholastic book

programs. She remembers reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* as a girl and the effect it had on her. She wants her book to educate, to inspire, to give people the opportunity to discover something they otherwise might not. The book has been translated into twenty-five languages—including Lithuanian—and has recently been released in Israel. She is proud that teachers are building it into their curriculums all over the world.

Between Shades of Gray has crossed over, and adults are reading it—and enjoying it—too. In Italy, Brazil,

Spain, Portugal, Singapore, and Malaysia it's being sold as adult fiction. "The Italians have really embraced this book. They're so passionate; maybe because Italians are very passionate emotional people, they just love it."

But she says she really enjoys writing young adult historical fiction. The project she's currently working on begins in Poland during Operation Hannibal, when the Soviets were pushing in. "My father's cousin Erika had a passage on the [MV Wilhelm] Gustloff," which was sunk in January 1945, when it was evacuating civilians, military personnel, and Nazi officials surrounded by the Red Army in East Prussia. I look forward to reading it.

"My desire to be Lithuanian, and to feel Lithuanian, has increased tenfold. I want to be Lithuanian more than ever," she tells me. Her dream is that maybe her book will open the door to telling the stories of the real people who lived through that era. "Lithuania is a small country, but it can teach the world large lessons of peaceful endurance and the miraculous nature of the human spirit. Those are universal lessons that we desperately need in the world."

Šepetyš wraps up her presentation and retreats to a cozy couch at the back of the store, pen in hand, poised to sign books. She greets each of her fans warmly and enthusiastically listens to each of them tell her their story. She reacts sincerely—but in the same way—to everyone, responding, "What an amazing story! You have to write that!" Just before I leave, she is sitting with a teenage girl who tells her she's not Lithuanian. Šepetyš exclaims, "You mean you're not Lithuanian, you just picked it up, read it, and got interested?" She smiles happily, "You are exactly the kind of person I wanted to reach." ■

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