



## Salt to the Sea

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# **Salt to the Sea**

*Ruta Sepetys*

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400 pages

Extrait

**joana**

Guilt is a hunter.

My conscience mocked me, picking fights like a petulant child.

*It's all your fault*, the voice whispered.

I quickened my pace and caught up with our small group. The Germans would march us off the field road if they found us. Roads were reserved for the military. Evacuation orders hadn't been issued and anyone fleeing East Prussia was branded a deserter. But what did that matter? I became a deserter four years ago, when I fled from Lithuania.

Lithuania.

I had left in 1941. What was happening at home? Were the dreadful things whispered in the streets true? We approached a mound on the side of the road. The small boy in front of me whimpered and pointed. He had joined us two days prior, just wandered out of the forest alone and quietly began following us.

"Hello, little one. How old are you?" I had asked.

"Six," he replied.

"Who are you traveling with?"

He paused and dropped his head. "My Omi."

I turned toward the woods to see if his grandmother had emerged. "Where is your Omi now?" I asked.

The wandering boy looked up at me, his pale eyes wide. "She didn't wake up."

So the little boy traveled with us, often drifting just slightly ahead or behind. And now he stood, pointing to a flap of dark wool beneath a meringue of snow.

I waved the group onward and when everyone advanced I ran to the snow-covered heap. The wind lifted a layer of icy flakes revealing the dead blue face of a woman, probably in her twenties. Her mouth and eyes were hinged open, fixed in fear. I dug through her iced pockets, but they had already been picked. In the lining of her jacket I found her identification papers. I stuffed them in my coat to pass on to the Red Cross and dragged her body off the road and into the field. She was dead, frozen solid, but the thought of tanks rolling over her was more than I could bear.

I ran back to the road and our group. The wandering boy stood in the center of the path, snow falling all around him.

"She didn't wake up either?" he asked quietly.

I shook my head and took his mittenend hand in mine.

And then we both heard it in the distance.

*Bang.*

**florian**

Fate is a hunter.

Engines buzzed in a swarm above. *Der Schwarze Tod*, "the Black Death," they called them. I hid beneath the trees. The planes weren't visible, but I felt them. Close. Trapped by darkness both ahead and behind, I weighed my options. An explosion detonated and death crept closer, curling around me in fingers of smoke. I ran.

My legs churned, sluggish, disconnected from my racing mind. I willed them to move, but my conscience noosed around my ankles and pulled down hard.

"You are a talented young man, Florian." That's what Mother had said.

“You are Prussian. Make your own decisions, son,” said my father.

Would he have approved of my decisions, of the secrets I now carried across my back? Amidst this war between Hitler and Stalin, would Mother still consider me talented, or criminal?

The Soviets would kill me. But how would they torture me first? The Nazis would kill me, but only if they uncovered the plan. How long would it remain a secret? The questions propelled me forward, whipping through the cold forest, dodging branches. I clutched my side with one hand, my pistol with the other. The pain surged with each breath and step, releasing warm blood out of the angry wound.

The sound of the engines faded. I had been on the run for days and my mind felt as weak as my legs. The hunter preyed on the fatigued and weary. I had to rest. The pain slowed me to a jog and finally a walk.

Through the dense trees in the forest I spied branches hiding an old potato cellar. I jumped in.

*Bang.*

### **emilia**

Shame is a hunter.

I would rest a moment. I had a moment, didn’t I? I slid across the cold, hard earth toward the back of the cave. The ground quivered. Soldiers were close. I had to move but felt so tired. It was a good idea to put branches over the mouth of the forest cellar. Wasn’t it? No one would trek this far off the road. Would they? I pulled the pink woolen cap down over my ears and tugged my coat closed near my throat. Despite my bundled layers, January’s teeth bit sharp. My fingers had lost all feeling. Pieces of my hair, frozen crisp to my collar, tore as I turned my head. So I thought of August.

My eyes dropped closed.

And then they opened.

A Russian soldier was there.

He leaned over me with a light, poking my shoulder with his pistol.

I jumped, frantically pushing myself back.

“Fräulein.” He grinned, pleased that I was alive. “*Komme, Fräulein. How old are you?*”

“Fifteen,” I whispered. “Please, I’m not German. *Nicht Deutsche.*”

He didn’t listen, didn’t understand, or didn’t care. He pointed his gun at me and yanked at my ankle. “Shh, Fräulein.” He lodged the gun under the bone of my chin.

I pleaded. I put my hands across my stomach and begged.

He moved forward.

No. This would not happen. I turned my head. “Shoot me, soldier. Please.”

*Bang.*

### **alfred**

Fear is a hunter.

*But brave warriors, we brush away fear with a flick of the wrist. We laugh in the face of fear, kick it like a stone across the street. Yes, Hannelore, I compose these letters in my mind first, as I cannot abandon my men as often as I think of you.*

*You would be proud of your watchful companion, sailor Alfred Frick. Today I saved a young woman from falling into the sea. It was nothing really, but she was so grateful she clung to me, not wanting to let go.*

*“Thank you, sailor.” Her warm whisper lingered in my ear. She was quite pretty and smelled like fresh eggs, but there have been many grateful and pretty girls. Oh, do not be concerned. You and your red sweater are foremost in my thoughts. How fondly, how incessantly, I think of my Hannelore and red-sweater days.*

*I’m relieved you are not here to see this. Your sugared heart could not bear the treacherous circumstances*

*here in the port of Gotenhafen. At this very moment, I am guarding dangerous explosives. I am serving Germany well. Only seventeen, yet carrying more valor than those twice my years. There is talk of an honor ceremony but I'm too busy fighting for the Führer to accept honors. Honors are for the dead, I've told them. We must fight while we are alive!*

*Yes, Hannelore, I shall prove to all of Germany. There is indeed a hero inside of me.*

*Bang.*

I abandoned my mental letter and crouched in the supply closet, hoping no one would find me. I did not want to go outside.

### **florian**

I stood in the forest cellar, my gun fixed on the dead Russian. The back of his head had departed from his skull. I rolled him off the woman.

She wasn't a woman. She was a girl in a pink woolen cap. And she had fainted.

I scavenged through the Russian's frozen pockets and took cigarettes, a flask, a large sausage wrapped in paper, his gun, and ammunition. He wore two watches on each wrist, trophies collected from his victims. I didn't touch them.

Crouching near the corner of the cellar, I scanned the cold chamber for signs of food but saw none. I put the ammunition in my pack, careful not to disturb the small box wrapped in a cloth. The box. How could something so small hold such power? Wars had been waged over less. Was I really willing to die for it? I gnawed at the dried sausage, savoring the saliva it produced.

The ground vibrated slightly.

This Russian wasn't alone. There would be more. I had to move.

I turned the top on the soldier's flask and raised it to my nose. Vodka. I opened my coat, then my shirt, and poured the alcohol down my side. The intensity of the pain produced a flash in front of my eyes. My ruptured flesh fought back, twisting and pulsing. I took a breath, bit back a yell, and tortured the gash with the remainder of the alcohol.

The girl stirred in the dirt. Her head snapped away from the dead Russian. Her eyes scanned the gun at my feet and the flask in my hand. She sat up, blinking. Her pink hat slid from her head and fell silently into the dirt. The side of her coat was streaked with blood. She reached into her pocket.

I threw down the flask and grabbed the gun.

She opened her mouth and spoke.

Polish.

### **emilia**

The Russian soldier stared at me, mouth open, eyes empty.

Dead.

What had happened?

Crouching in the corner was a young man dressed in civilian clothes. His coat and shirt were unfastened, his skin bloodied and bruised to a deep purple. He held a gun. Was he going to shoot me? No, he had killed the Russian. He had saved me.

"Are you okay?" I asked, barely recognizing my own voice. His face twisted at the sound of my words.

He was German.

I was Polish.

He would want nothing to do with me. Adolf Hitler had declared that Polish people were subhuman. We were to be destroyed so the Germans could have the land they needed for their empire. Hitler said Germans

were superior and would not live among Poles. We were not Germanizable. But our soil was.

I pulled a potato from my pocket and held it out to him. "Thank you."

The dirt pulsed slightly. How much time had passed? "We have to go," I told him.

I tried to use my best German. In my head the sentences were intact, but I wasn't sure they came out that way. Sometimes when I spoke German people laughed at me and then I knew my words were wrong. I lowered my arm and saw my sleeve, splattered with Russian blood. Would this ever end? Tears stirred inside of me. I did not want to cry.

The German stared at me, a combination of fatigue and frustration. But I understood.

His eyes on the potato said, *Emilia, I'm hungry.*

The dried blood on his shirt said, *Emilia, I'm injured.*

But the way he clutched his pack told me the most.

*Emilia, don't touch this.*

### joana

We trudged farther down the narrow road. Fifteen refugees. The sun had finally surrendered and the temperature followed. A blind girl ahead of me, Ingrid, held a rope tethered to a horse-drawn cart. I had my sight, but we shared a handicap: we both walked into a dark corridor of combat, with no view of what lay ahead. Perhaps her lost vision was a gift. The blind girl could hear and smell things that the rest of us couldn't.

Did she hear the last gasp of the old man as he slipped under the wheels of a cart several kilometers back?

Did she taste coins in her mouth when she walked over the fresh blood in the snow?

"Heartbreaking. They killed her," said a voice behind me. It was the old shoemaker. I stopped and allowed him to catch up. "The frozen woman back there," he continued. "Her shoes killed her. I keep telling them, but they don't listen. Poorly made shoes will torture your feet, inhibit your progress. Then you will stop." He squeezed my arm. His soft red face peered out from beneath his hat. "And then you will die," he whispered. The old man spoke of nothing but shoes. He spoke of them with such love and emotion that a woman in our group had crowned him "the shoe poet." The woman disappeared a day later but the nickname survived.

"The shoes always tell the story," said the shoe poet.

"Not always," I countered.

"Yes, always. Your boots, they are expensive, well made. That tells me that you come from a wealthy family. But the style is one made for an older woman. That tells me they probably belonged to your mother. A mother sacrificed her boots for her daughter. That tells me you are loved, my dear. And your mother is not here, so that tells me that you are sad, my dear. The shoes tell the story."

I paused in the center of the frozen road and watched the stubby old cobbler shuffle ahead of me. The shoe poet was right. Mother had sacrificed for me. When we fled from Lithuania she rushed me to Insterburg and, through a friend, arranged for me to work in the hospital. That was four years ago. Where was Mother now? I thought of the countless refugees trekking toward freedom. How many millions of people had lost their home and family during the war? I had agreed with Mother to look to the future, but secretly I dreamed of returning to the past. Had anyone heard from my father or brother?

The blind girl put her face to the sky and raised her arm in signal.

And then I heard them.

Planes.

### florian

We had barely crawled out of the potato cellar when the Polish girl began to cry. She knew I was going to

leave her.

I had no choice. She would slow me down.

Hitler aimed to destroy all Poles. They were Slavic, branded inferior. My father said the Nazis had killed millions of Poles. Polish intellectuals were savagely executed in public. Hitler set up extermination camps in German-occupied Poland, filtering the blood of innocent Jews into the Polish soil.

Hitler was a coward. That had been one thing Father and I agreed upon.

“*Prosz? . . . bitte,*” she begged, alternating between Polish and broken German.

I couldn’t stand to look at her, at the streaks of dead Russian splattered down her sleeve. I started to walk away, her sobs flapping behind me.

“Wait. Please,” she called out.

The sound of her crying was painfully familiar. It had the exact tone of my younger sister, Anni, and the sobs I heard through the hallway the day Mother took her last breath.

Anni. Where was she? Was she too in some dark forest hole with a gun to her head?

A pain ripped through my side, forcing me to stop. The girl’s feet quickly approached. I resumed walking.

“Thank you,” she chirped from behind.

The sun disappeared and the cold tightened its fist. My calculations told me that I needed to walk another two kilometers west before stopping for the night. There was a better chance of finding shelter along a field road, but also a better chance of running into troops. It was wiser to continue along the edge of the forest. The girl heard them before I did. She grabbed my arm. The buzzing of aircraft engines surged fast and close from behind. The Russians were targeting German ground troops nearby. Were they in front of us or beside us?

The bombs began falling. With each explosion, every bone in my body vibrated and hammered, clanging violently against the bell tower that was my flesh. The sound of anti-aircraft fire rang through the sky, answering the initial blasts.

The girl tried to pull me onward.

I shoved her away. “Run!”

She shook her head, pointed forward, and awkwardly tried to pull me through the snow. I wanted to run, forget about her, leave her in the forest. But then I saw the droplets of blood in the snow coming from beneath her bulky coat.

And I could not. *Revue de presse*

#### **Praise for *Salt to the Sea*:**

"Ruta Sepetys acts as champion of the interstitial people so often ignored — whole populations lost in the cracks of history." —***The New York Times***

"[A] riveting novel . . . Sepetys skillfully weaves history into her story, here grounding her nuanced characters in the events of winter 1945. Vivid details punctuate the spare prose." —***The Washington Post***

"Ruta Sepetys is a master of historical fiction. In *Salt to the Sea* the hard truths of her herculean research are tempered with effortless, intimate storytelling, as her warm and human characters breathe new life into one of the world's most terrible and neglected tragedies." —**Elizabeth Wein, *New York Times* bestselling author of Printz Award Honor Book *Code Name Verity***

"A rich, page-turning story that brings to vivid life a terrifying—and little-known—moment in World War II history." —**Steve Sheinkin, author of Newbery Honor and National Book Award finalist *Bomb***

***"Brutal. Beautiful. Honest."* —Sabaa Tahir, *New York Times* bestselling author of *An Ember in the Ashes***

*"Ruta Sepetys is more than just an author — she's history's answer to CSI."*—Mashable

*"[A] stunning historical novel."*—Hypable

*\* "Sepetys excels in shining light on lost chapters of history, and this visceral novel proves a memorable testament to strength and resilience in the face of war and cruelty."* —Publishers Weekly, starred review

*\* "This haunting gem of a novel begs to be remembered, and in turn, it tries to remember the thousands of real people its fictional characters represent. What it asks of us is that their memories, and their stories, not be abandoned to the sea."* —Booklist, starred review

*\* "Artfully told and sensitively crafted, Sepetys's exploration of this little-known piece of history will leave readers weeping."* —School Library Journal, starred review

*"The inevitability of the ending (including the loss of several characters) doesn't change its poignancy, and the short chapters and slowly revealed back stories for each character guarantee the pages keep turning. Heartbreaking, historical, and a little bit hopeful."* —Kirkus

*"This book includes all the reasons why teens read: for knowledge, for romance, for amazing and irritating characters. This novel will break readers' hearts and then put them back together a little more whole."* —VOYA

*"Sepetys's...scene-setting is impeccable; the penetrating cold of the journey is palpable, and she excels at conveying the scope of the losses while giving them a human face....[T]his elegiac tale succeeds with impressive research, affecting characters, and keen, often unsettling insights into humans' counterposed tendencies toward evil and nobility. Readers will be left to discuss which impulse triumphs here."* —The Horn Book Présentation de l'éditeur

*For readers of Between Shades of Gray and All the Light We Cannot See, international bestselling author Ruta Sepetys returns to WWII in this epic novel that shines a light on one of the war's most devastating—yet unknown—tragedies.*

*In 1945, World War II is drawing to a close in East Prussia, and thousands of refugees are on a desperate trek toward freedom, almost all of them with something to hide. Among them are Joana, Emilia, and Florian, whose paths converge en route to the ship that promises salvation, the Wilhelm Gustloff. Forced by circumstance to unite, the three find their strength, courage, and trust in each other tested with each step closer toward safety.*

*Just when it seems freedom is within their grasp, tragedy strikes. Not country, nor culture, nor status matter as all ten thousand people aboard must fight for the same thing: survival.*

*Told in alternating points of view, and perfect for fans of Anthony Doerr's Pulitzer Prize-winning All the Light We Cannot See, Erik Larson's critically acclaimed #1 NYT bestseller Dead Wake, and Elizabeth Wein's Printz Honor Book Code Name Verity, this masterful work of historical fiction is inspired by the real-life tragedy that was the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff--the greatest maritime disaster in history. As she did in Between Shades of Gray, Ruta Sepetys unearths a shockingly little-known casualty of a gruesome war, and proves that humanity can prevail, even in the darkest of hours.*

*Praise for Salt to the Sea:*

*"Ruta Sepetys is a master of historical fiction. In Salt to the Sea the hard truths of her herculean research are tempered with effortless, intimate storytelling."*—Elizabeth Wein, New York Times bestselling author of Printz Award Honor Book *Code Name Verity*

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*Praise for Between Shades of Gray:*

*A New York Times Notable Book of 2011*

*A Wall Street Journal Best Children's Book of 2011*

*A Publishers Weekly, School Library Journal, Booklist, and Kirkus Best Book of 2011*

*The iTunes 2011 Rewind Best Teen Novel*

*2012 Indies Choice Young Adult Book of the Year*

*A Carnegie Medal Finalist*

*A William C. Morris Finalist*

*A New York Times and International Bestseller*

*"Few books are beautifully written, fewer still are important; this novel is both."*—The Washington Post

\* *"A harrowing page-turner."*—Publishers Weekly, starred review

\* *"A gripping story."*—School Library Journal, starred review

\* *"Bitterly sad, fluidly written...Sepetys' flowing prose gently carries readers."*—Kirkus, starred review

\* *"Beautifully written and deeply felt...an important book that deserves the widest possible readership."*—Booklist, starred review

*"Ruta Sepetys has crafted a brilliant story of love and survival that will keep their memory alive for generations to come."*—Laurie Halse Anderson, bestselling author of *Speak* and *Wintergirls*

*"In terrifying detail, Ruta Sepetys re-creates World War II coming of age all too timely today. Between Shades of Gray is a document long overdue."*—Richard Peck, Newbery Award-winning author of *A Year Down Yonder*

*“Between Shades of Gray is a story of astonishing force. Beautiful and unforgettable.”—Susan Campbell Bartoletti, Newbery Honor-winning author of Hitler Youth*

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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