

## 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Summer Reading Guide: *Between Shades of Gray*

**Carefully read the following about the historical context of *Between Shades of Gray*. This information will help you understand the reading.**

Ruta Sepetys' *Between Shades of Gray* is the story of a young girl and her family deported from their home in Lithuania in 1941. Their struggle and hardships are told in the first person, from the moment when the Soviet secret police, come to take Lina, her mother, and her younger brother away, through their forced work and starvation in Siberia. While not a memoir, *Between Shades of Gray* is based on many true stories, including those of the author's own relatives.

Lina's family's hardships, like those of tens of thousands of other Lithuanian families can all be traced back to one man: Stalin. In the modern West, Stalin is recognized as a both a paranoid dictator and as one of the main Allies in World War 2. By 1929, Stalin ruled the USSR (communist Russia) as a dictator. He implemented government policies to control the people of his country by fear: the state took over their farms causing wide-spread famine – there was mass starvation and people lost all of their rights. His secret police, the NKVD, would arrest people for political crimes which they had not committed, and most often their families would be arrested too. It is estimated that by 1936, these Gulags (political prisons) contained almost 5,000,000 people. Imagine if your father or uncle were arrested for a fake plot to kill a government leader, even though there were no evidence against him. Imagine if he were shot without a trial and you and the rest of your family were arrested and sent to live in a wintery wasteland.

Stalin did not just jail and terrorize the people of Russia. He had plans to expand. In 1941, the year of this story, 130,000 people were arrested in Lithuania and sent to Siberia, and 70% of them were women and children. An additional 150,000 more people were sent to Gulags in Siberia. Anyone who was involved in any type of civic organization or local government was arrested and often shot, while the rest of their family would be arrested and deported, usually in the middle of the night. Families were herded onto cattle cars on trains and travelled thousands of miles to camps where they were starved and worked to death. Thousands, the old and very young, usually died on the train ride. Those who survived the journey were subjected to back-breaking labor while slowly starving to death. Many of them were serving 20 year prison sentences, all for crimes which they had not committed.

It was not until the mid-1950s, after Stalin's death in 1953, that the USSR began to let political prisoners and their families go from the Gulags. Even then, they were not often allowed to return to the places they had lived before. Many Lithuanians were unable to return to their homes once they were freed; many were forced to move elsewhere and start life over again.

**Paragraph Response: Please thoroughly and thoughtfully respond to both prompts below. Make sure you answer all parts of the prompt, and use evidence from the book to support your answers. Please type your response, and bring a printed copy on the first day of school. Each response should be a half page, numbered, and correctly formatted (Times New Roman, 12 point font, double space, heading).**

- 1) Being held prisoner on the train brings out the best and worst in some of the inhabitants. Consider and discuss some of the ways that individuals extend their assistance and support. How do their choices differ from those who are most unkind to others?
- 2) Discuss the character traits that allow Lina, Jonas, and Andrius to ultimately persevere. How are these characters similar to each other? In what ways are they different? Which character is most like you?

**Paragraph Response: Please thoroughly and thoughtfully respond to one of the prompts below. Make sure you answer all parts of the prompt, and use evidence from the book to support your answers. Please type your response, and bring a printed copy on the first day of school. Each response should be a half page, numbered, and correctly formatted (Times New Roman, 12 point font, double space, heading).**

- 3) As the novel opens, Lina explains that though the signs were in place, she has little understanding that her parents had planned to attempt to escape Lithuania. What can be inferred about her understanding of the political climate in her country? Do you think her surprise is a typical reaction in a teen? Why or why not?
- 4) When Jonas observes his mother smashing her beloved china and crystal before they depart their home, he asks her why she is destroying these items. She replies, "Because I love them so much." Do you consider this an act of rebellion? Why or why not? In your opinion, is her reaction appropriate? In what ways is she trying to control the situation?
- 5) Throughout the novel, Lina uses her passion for her art to remain connected to her family and the outside world. What are some of the specific ways she does this?