Those who are gone are not necessarily lost.
This book is a work of historical fiction. The *Wilhelm Gustloff*, the Amber Room, and Operation Hannibal, however, are very real. The sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* is the deadliest disaster in maritime history, with losses dwarfing the death tolls of the famous ships *Titanic* and *Lusitania*. Yet remarkably, most people have never heard of it. On January 30, 1945, four torpedoes waited in the belly of Soviet submarine S-13. Each torpedo was painted with a scrawled dedication: For the Motherland. For the Soviet People. For Leningrad. For Stalin. Three of the four torpedoes were launched, destroying the *Wilhelm Gustloff* and killing estimates of more than nine thousand people. The majority of the passengers on the *Gustloff* were civilians, with an estimated five thousand being children. The ghost ship, as it is sometimes called, now lies off the coast of Poland, the large gothic letters of her name still visible underwater.

Over two million people were successfully evacuated during Operation Hannibal, the largest sea evacuation in modern history. Hannibal quickly transported not only soldiers but also civilians to safety from the advancing Russian troops. Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, ethnic Germans, and residents of the East Prussian and Polish corridors all fled toward the sea. My father’s cousins were among them. My father, like Joana’s mother, waited in refugee camps hoping to return to Lithuania. But that did not happen. Baltic refugees waited half a century before they could return to their nation of origin. Most who were forced to flee established new lives in different cities and countries. The evacuees walked, rode cratered trains, and fled over water.

There are many important stories of World War II. Much has been documented about combat, politics, guilt, and responsibility. Suffering emerged the victor, sparing no nation involved. As I wrote this novel, I was haunted by thoughts of the helpless children and teenagers—innocent victims of border shifts, ethnic cleansings, and vengeful regimes. Hundreds of thousands of children were orphaned during the war, forced to battle the beast of war on their own. Many experienced unspeakable atrocities, some miraculous acts of kindness by complete strangers. The child and young adult narrative is what I chose to represent in the novel, seeing the war through the eyes of youths from different nations, forced to leave everything they loved behind.

Every nation has hidden history, countless stories preserved only by those who experienced them. Stories of war are often read and discussed worldwide by readers whose nations stood on opposite sides during battle. History divided us, but through reading we can be united in story, study, and remembrance. Books join us together as a global reading community, but more important, a global human community striving to learn from the past.

What determines how we remember history and which elements are preserved and penetrate the collective consciousness? If historical novels stir your interest, pursue the facts, history, memoirs, and personal testimonies available. These are the shoulders that historical fiction sits upon. When the survivors are gone we must not let the truth disappear with them.

Please, give them a voice.
For Discussion and Analysis

- As the novel opens and readers are introduced to each of the four protagonists, they are told by Joana, “Guilt is a hunter.” Florian states, “Fate is a hunter.” Emilia shares, “Shame is a hunter.” And Alfred declares, “Fear is a hunter.” What makes this common refrain such a powerful one? How does it immediately capture the internal conflict of each of these characters? What role do guilt, fate, shame, and fear play in their respective lives?

- Florian’s father tells him, “You are Prussian. Make your own decisions, son.” What do you believe he means by this statement? In what ways are his father’s words meaningful to him? In your opinion, does Florian successfully heed his father’s advice?

- What are the consequences of Florian’s decision to shoot the Russian soldier about to attack Emilia? How does this one decision change the course of their lives? In what ways does Florian become Emilia’s “knight”? Do you believe the actions of a single person can have a profound difference on another’s life? Why or why not?

- When reaching out to thank Florian for saving her, Emilia thinks, “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.” In what ways does Emilia’s awareness of being a marginalized person come into play in the story? In the larger context, examine why Hitler sees Poles and others as a less valuable people. Can you draw any parallels to the current political climate in the United States and throughout the world?

- Why is repeated attention called to Emilia’s pink hat? Beyond its means of identifying her to others, how does it serve as a symbol of her innocence? Can you think of any other examples of colors described by Sepetys in a meaningful manner?

- Why does Emilia attempt to conceal her pregnancy? In what ways do her memories and fantasies of August Kleist help her persevere through her trauma?

- Florian observes the shoemaker’s dance and thinks, “He seemed like a wise man, a kind man.” In your opinion, is the shoemaker both of these things? Are there any other words you would use to describe him? In evaluating his actions throughout the course of the novel, what role does he serve the group?

- The shoe poet tells Florian, “The shoes tell the story.” Explain this statement. Do you agree? In what ways can we learn about someone from the shoes they wear?

- Describe Florian, Emilia, Joana, and Alfred. What makes them dynamic characters? What are their greatest strengths as people? What are their weaknesses? Using examples from the text, support your position. Are they the type of people you would befriend? Why or why not?

- Describe the “Alfred” in the imaginary letters written to Hannelore. How is he different than the “Frick” observed by those with whom he works and interacts on the Wilhelm Gustloff? What does this dual perspective allow readers to understand about his character?

- How are children affected by war? Can you provide some examples, whether from war in general or *Salt to the Sea* specifically? What roles do young Klaus and Emilia’s baby play in the story? While they each suffer great loss, in what ways do these two children serve as symbols of hope for the people in their lives?

- *Salt to the Sea* is told in multiple first-person narratives; how would the story be different if only a single character were telling it? Do you think changing the point of view would improve the story? Why or why not?

- As they travel toward the shore in hopes of a spot aboard the Wilhelm Gustloff, Florian tells Joana that Emilia is without identity papers, and Joana thinks to herself, “Emilia had no papers. No papers, no future.” Why does her lack of documentation subject her to a likely death sentence?

- Joana is Lithuanian. Yet she is welcome in Germany and considered “Germanizable” because her mother’s family has German roots. While discussing the inequality of Hitler’s position on Poles, Eva says, “Life’s not fair. You’re lucky. Do you think you have time to be moral?” Consider Eva’s statement. Do you agree? In a moral crisis, in what ways do the actions and reactions of an individual define them?

- Considering each of the main characters’ perspectives, in what ways is *Salt to the Sea* a story about things that have been lost? What does each character find along the way?

- Before and during World War II, the Nazis looted and plundered art across Europe. Consider the systematic theft, deliberate destruction, and miraculous survival of Europe’s art treasures. Why does art such as the Amber Room have such power over individuals? What does it say about mankind that we make a tremendous effort to preserve and protect it? How does Florian view his theft of the swan to be his revenge against Hitler?

- Explain the significance of the title, *Salt to the Sea*. Given the magnitude of the tragedy of the Wilhelm Gustloff, does it accurately describe the events and relationships portrayed in the novel?

This section was created by Dr. Rose Brock, an assistant professor in the Library Science Department in the College of Education at Sam Houston State University. Dr. Brock holds a Ph.D. in Library Science, specializing in children’s and young adult literature.
LEIGH BISHOP | Diver

Leigh Bishop is a world-renowned deep sea diver, acclaimed for his shipwreck explorations and underwater photography. He has explored hundreds of sunken ships, including the legendary Titanic and Lusitania. Leigh’s detailed account of diving the Wilhelm Gustloff in 2003 brought chilling insight to the disaster.

1. Before diving and exploring the Gustloff, in what ways did you prepare?

   With any shipwreck expedition there is inevitably a degree of preparation involved, and the Gustloff dives were no different. The wreck lies below a depth limit endorsed by recreational divers and therefore falls into a technical dive category. By using special, closed-circuit rebreather technology rather than traditional scuba equipment, we could recycle the onboard gases breathed and extend our time spent actually physically exploring the wreck. The Baltic Sea, however, is very cold, which means the divers had to prepare for low temperatures and in-water survival with drysuit heaters to see them through the extended decompression times. Perhaps the main thing that hung across all the divers’ minds was the possibility of confronting the vast amount of human remains that were likely to be found inside the wreck. The psychology of dealing with such a likelihood on an unprecedented scale was something the team could never prepare for.

2. You have explored and photographed dozens of sunken ships, including the Titanic and the Lusitania. In what way was your exploration of the Wilhelm Gustloff different from other explorations?

   Upon surfacing from my first dive to the Wilhelm Gustloff, I waited patiently for the dive boat to pick me up. As it attended to other divers who had surfaced prior, I had time to reflect on my dive. I had swum completely around the stern and witnessed the large Gothic lettering spelling out the name Wilhelm Gustloff spanning almost the entire counter stern of the wreck. Whilst reflecting, I was utterly haunted by a presence that something had happened at this very spot where I now waited, as if a cold chill had crossed the hairs of my back, as if something evil was here with me, perhaps people from the past watching me. A presence I had never felt before—not even when we arrived at the site of the Titanic only months before in the same year.

3. What was most surprising about the sunken Gustloff?

   What was most surprising about the Gustloff was just how well the wreck was preserved, something that struck me immediately as the wreck came into view. The environmental impact on the wreck is unlike others that lie in more temperate waters, such as the famous RMS Lusitania. The reason for this is the naval worm, Teredo navalis, responsible for eating wood of shipwrecks, which is less active in the Baltic Sea because of the low salinity levels. The teak decking of the wreck was all still very much in place, and the stern poop deck was really quite remarkable. As I set my tripod up to shoot long-time exposure photos, I spared a moment to think of the people who maybe gathered on that very deck as the ship was sinking. Shadowing above me as I swam the decks were the haunting davits and, again, I thought about how cold it had to have been for them to freeze in place, unable to launch the lifeboats to save at least some of the many victims the ship took with her.

4. How is the wreck of the Wilhelm Gustloff regarded within the dive community?

   Wilhelm Gustloff has taken legendary status amongst the diving community. Few have dived into the cold depths to witness the history that is the Gustloff, but many would give their right hand to simply set eyes on the famous wreck. Today a no-diving policy hangs over the wreckage, and visitors, if any, are on a strict permit-only basis. With today’s modern technology any vessel nearing the navigational sinking position are quickly intercepted by Polish authorities.
In Conversation with Ruta Sepetys

CATHRYN J. PRINCE | Author and Journalist

Cathryn J. Prince is the author of *Death in the Baltic*, a compelling and comprehensive nonfiction book about the Wilhelm Gustloff disaster. Cathryn provided tremendous help during my research process. She shared her contacts, notes, and interview findings from her meetings with survivors. Visit her website at cathrynjprince.com.

1. How did you approach your research of the Wilhelm Gustloff—including survivor testimonies, documents, artifacts, etc.—to create a nonfiction narrative for your book *Death in the Baltic*?

I approach every book I write as a journalist; that’s how I got my start in writing and I continue that work now. Of course in this case I am reporting on the past. To me the story of the Wilhelm Gustloff is not only the story of a ship’s sinking. It is the story of how the people came to be aboard this ship. It is about what it was like to come of age in a part of Nazi Germany that until the early 1940s had remained in some ways isolated from what was happening in Berlin. I knew from the outset that the survivors would be the heart of the book. Without their accounts, the book would simply be a litany of events. My research took me to the US National Archives, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the German Federal Archives. The rich trove of original source documents and oral histories I found gave me the glue that held the story together. At every turn I needed to ask—what were the ramifications and implications for each action in the book? I also needed to anchor each person to the time and place, and to do that it was important to fill in the gaps of their lives before and after the sinking. Lastly, my goal was to get readers to care about each person. But before we care about what happens to, say, Helga Reuter Knickerbocker, we’ve got to know a bit about her childhood. We need to know little things about Helga, like she loved her older sister, she enjoyed summers on the Baltic Sea, and she loved the window seat in her bedroom.

2. During your research and interviews with survivors, what made the greatest impression on you?

War shapes so much of who we are as a nation, and a world. I’ve always been interested in not just the strategy, tactics, and politics of war—but what civilians and soldiers endured on the most basic level. I’m interested in war as a time of transformation—for individuals and society. The story of the Wilhelm Gustloff, with all its human drama, not only resurrects history but raises provocative questions about loss, survival, and how those impacted continue on year after year, decade after decade. For me the greatest impression I was left with is how the sinking haunts each survivor in very different ways. One can’t stand under a shower head anymore because it reminds her of near-drowning, another has turned a study into a shrine of sorts, another only spoke about it because she wanted people to know about her cousin who died on that day. Spending time with these men and women, now in their late seventies and eighties, was to see someone instantly transported back to that time period; to see them as they were when they were ten, fifteen, or seventeen.

3. Why do you feel it’s important for people to know the history of the Wilhelm Gustloff?

Because history is defined as much by what becomes part of the official record as by what is left unrecorded, few know this story. In this case, German censorship, Soviet suppression, and Western indifference buried the Gustloff’s story. Refusing to let the flailing Third Reich hear of defeat, Hitler prohibited officials from reporting the sinking. The Soviet Union suppressed the story partly because it doubted the integrity of the submarine commander and partly because to talk about the Gustloff might have cast light on their own atrocities. In the West, the event remained buried, first because of war fatigue and then because it was overshadowed by the Cold War. In time, German war guilt accomplished what government censorship could not. In the same way that survivors of the Dresden firebombing had difficulty finding an audience receptive to listening to and learning about their ordeal, so too did survivors of the Wilhelm Gustloff. Mourning was seen as tantamount to clinging to an immoral and evil past. For more than seventy years this story has been relatively hidden, as the victims inspired little sympathy after their role and their countries’ role in World War II. After all, WWII, perhaps more than any other war in recent history, is still portrayed in stark lines of black and white. Knowing the story of the Wilhelm Gustloff allows to us to understand that nothing is black and white.
EDWARD PETRUSKEVICH | Curator, Wilhelm Gustloff Online Museum

Edward Petruskevich has assembled the world’s largest public online collection of artifacts relating to the MV Wilhelm Gustloff. His knowledge of the ship, together with the museum pieces, helped me visualize and build the narrative around the ship. Visit the museum at wilhelmgustloffmuseum.com.

1. Approximately how many items, and what types of items, are currently in the collection of the Wilhelm Gustloff online museum?

The collection currently consists of almost 3,350 original photographs and is continuously expanding. The majority of these photographs are of the Wilhelm Gustloff from her first rivets of construction to her final days in Gotenhafen. Others include memorials, drawings, and wreck photographs taken from 1945 to the present. The online museum also showcases 280 daily agendas and menus from the Wilhelm Gustloff that were used onboard, and 230 artifacts from the ship. Many artifacts are souvenirs that were created to be sold in her gift shop during her 1938-1939 passenger voyages and primarily include small china pieces, pins, and cap tallies. Some of the more unusual souvenirs are a pillowcase embroidered with the Gustloff, a Norah Wellings sailor doll, and nautical flag bracelet that spells out the ship’s name. Other items include a handwritten journal from her official maiden voyage, a 1:100 scale model of the Wilhelm Gustloff built in 2009, and many original books and magazines chronicling the ship throughout her career.

2. Which items do you consider the most unique and how did you come upon them?

The most unique artifacts from the Wilhelm Gustloff come from her final voyage and wreck since so few have been made public. The collection has two boarding passes that belonged to Käthe Kraus for her evacuation voyage, which I found through a military collector in an online auction. There are currently only five of these passes known to exist that were printed on the ship’s own printing presses just before departure. I also have a piece of wreck wood that washed up in Leba, Poland, on February 11, 1945, and was carved into a figure of the Madonna. It was then presented to survivor Waltrud Grüter, who kept it with a pin she wore the night of the sinking, which is also part of the collection. The centerpiece of the online museum is a section of the Wilhelm Gustloff’s Neptune tile mosaic from her swimming pool. This was by far the most beautiful room on the ship, and it is where the second torpedo hit, killing nearly all of the 373 Women’s Naval Auxiliary who were housed there for the voyage. After the ship sank, she was imploded to prevent her from being a navigational hazard and the explosions ripped through the pool housed on the forward E deck. A friend of mine who made several dives on the Wilhelm Gustloff found the tile lying in the mud after it fell out of the ship, and it remained in his basement for several years after he raised it to the surface. He decided it needed a better home where people could view it, and I purchased it from him in 2016.

3. What do you hope visitors will come away with after visiting your Wilhelm Gustloff online museum? What can artifacts teach us about the Wilhelm Gustloff?

One of the important things to me is that people understand the Wilhelm Gustloff wasn’t just a means to an end during the closing days of World War II. She was once the flagship of the Kraft durch Freude* fleet and laid the groundwork for future generations of ships with her open spaces, single class, and cruising capabilities. She became highly successful as a passenger ship. The artifacts that come from her cruising days give a glimpse into the structured voyages of the Third Reich and the propaganda that was constantly drilled into the minds of Germany’s citizens. A journal written during a voyage to Italy gives a lot of praise to their leader for allowing them to have such enjoyable adventures. Many of the items recovered from the Wilhelm Gustloff expressed praise for Hitler and all he has given his people, including the Wilhelm Gustloff, which was a very effective propaganda tool herself.

I believe the best way we can remember the disaster and the Wilhelm Gustloff herself is to tell her story through artifacts and what they represent. The love letters written by sailors to their sweethearts impart a dire need for the war to come to an end, and express the same hopes and fears those on the Allied side had. The boarding passes that were to be the salvation of those fleeing the advancing Red Army ended up being the holders’ demise. A Kriegsmarine blanket that a weary survivor had wrapped around himself as he climbed a rope ladder up the side of the T-36 after the Gustloff had been sunk. A simple piece that shows the longing to stay warm while its holes show the struggle of staying alive in the middle of the sea. Each of these artifacts shows us that she wasn’t just a ship that was sunk with a heavy loss of life, but the Wilhelm Gustloff emphasized what was going to mirror the very best of Germany in the 1930s and the very worst in the 1940s. Over 100,000 people sailed and stayed on the Gustloff during her life, and each person and artifact has a story to tell. Calling the ship “it” soon turns into “she” as a mass of steel and wood seemingly turns into a humanized character. Eventually, those on board give her a more affectionate name, the Willi G, and for some, her loss equates to losing a family member. Looking beyond politics and race, gender and affluence, it is a story about people. People so unimaginably exhausted and hysterically seeking a way to escape death in one of the darkest chapters of our history. It is also a story about the Wilhelm Gustloff: the ship that so many looked to as a vessel of hope, but that delivered them to the perilous fate they were trying so desperately to avoid.

*The Kraft durch Freude was a leisure organization established by Nazi Germany to encourage tourism and the ideology and practice associated with the twentieth-century German Nazi Party.
In Conversation with Ruta Sepetys

MARA LIPACIS | Wilhelm Gustloff Survivor

Born in Latvia, Mara Lipacis was six years old when she boarded the doomed Wilhelm Gustloff with her mother and older brother. As the ship was sinking, Mara's brother was separated from the family. Although young Mara was handed down into a lifeboat, her mother remained on deck. Mara generously shared her experience with me, some of which she recounts here.

1. Please give us a brief account of your experience onboard the Wilhelm Gustloff, who accompanied you, and a bit about your experience when the ship sank.
   I remember a gray sky, cold wind, and crowds of people as my mother, brother, and I boarded the ship, lying on a mattress with suitcases by our heads in a large hall with lots of people around, rushing up a crowded hall, standing on a sloping, cold, crowded deck, then very few people on the deck, then my mother lifting me into a sailor's arms, then holding on to the seat of the lifeboat as it was riding through large waves.

2. What is your most vivid memory of the sinking?
   There are a couple of scenes that have stayed in my mind:
   1) Holding on to my mother's hand in a crowded corridor in order to get to the deck with people pushing and shoving each other.
   2) While in the lifeboat, seeing the Wilhelm Gustloff with lights ablaze turn onto one side and go underwater. In my mind I remember seeing my mother standing on one deck but I do not know if this can be true even though our lifeboat was not far from the ship.
   3) Hanging on to a rope with all my strength while being pulled up from our lifeboat to the torpedo boat that rescued us.

3. What role did others, including your mother and brother, play in your survival?
   My mother unselfishly handed me to a sailor who put me on the lifeboat and remained standing on the sinking ship in hope that I would have a small chance to survive. My ten-year-old brother saved me from being sent to an orphanage and an unknown future when he saw me standing in line with other small rescued children on the boat in Sassnitz.

4. In what ways do you feel that the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff differs from the Titanic?
   The sinking of the Titanic was an accident caused perhaps by carelessness and overconfidence. The sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff was intentional and represents the horror and cruelty men are capable of inflicting on each other.
1. What year did you first dive the Wilhelm Gustloff and what sort of permission did you need to explore the wreck?

The very first free-swimming scuba divers’ descent to the Wilhelm Gustloff’s wreck took place in the summer of 1973. I was very involved in organizing the project and, with two other divers, I explored the wreck a number of times. In total, I explored the wreck for over seven hours. I’m sure there were some explorations done before us, by the Russians and by Poles, commissioned by state institutions. But as they were poorly equipped, wore iron shoes and large metal helmets, they were unable to see properly (let alone search) the inside of the wreck. Nevertheless, their reports were beyond imagination. Under the guise of the “Search for the Amber Room,” our dive team finally received the blessing from appropriate authorities and received assistance from several state companies. We were granted formal permission from the Main Maritime Office and were assigned to thoroughly investigate “Underwater Obstacle #73.” This meant we had to precisely examine the position of the wreck, describe its condition, and locate any and all high elements protruding above the water level. Situated close to a busy fairway used by tankers, these elements were considered dangerous and had to be detonated to clear the way. As an architect, I was asked to draw a sketch of the sunken Wilhelm Gustloff wreck. See page 419 in paperback edition for sketch

2. Describe what you saw and experienced during your dive.

Sitting on the side of our base ship and looking down at the water, I found myself pensive and painfully aware that forty-five meters below rested the remains of thousands of people who, in deadly panic, had to leave their homes and, in freezing tem-peratures, ran from the approaching Soviet Red Army. People from thousands of little towns and villages. People of all ages and statuses, some in horse-drawn carts and carriages, some afoot, others on bicycles. Children, mothers, some of them pregnant, the old, the young, some sick, my God, so many—millions of them—with desperation and hope in their hearts, running for their lives, heading toward the last evacuation points on the coast of the Baltic Sea. Some tried for passage in Piława (then Pillau), others hoped to cross the frozen lagoon afoot to get to the coast on the other side, and then along the shore to reach Gdansk and Gdynia (then Gotenhafen). Several thousands of them, probably with great relief, finally boarded the Wilhelm Gustloff. And there I was, reflecting on those cruel times and all the suffering and tragedy of so many whose roads had ended here below. I knew in a short while I’d dive and find myself among their bodies, in their underwater cemetery. My first descent was to check the anchor. Slowly, with my head down, eyes half-closed and holding the rope, I reached the bottom and found the visibility quite good.

At that point I had to confront the cruel history. I saw blackened human remains, bones, skulls. I saw elements of leather belts, shoes, buckles, bundles of textiles here and there. The sight affected me intensely and remains in my memory. It accompanied me throughout the entire exploration and many years after. I still remember it well. The wreck was covered with a thin layer of silt and as visibility was very good, I could see the individual layers of paint (the ship had been repainted a number of times). The name Wilhelm Gustloff on the side of the ship looked very impressive. We repeatedly swam through the shaft of the cargo hatch in the bow to where the shattered hull rested. I tried to spot traces that divers before us may have left. Rumor had it that over fifty million dollars was deposited in the captain’s safe. There was no way for us to confirm it, and we found no evidence whatsoever of any traces of burned-out holes in the sides of the wreck.

There were three of us divers. On one occasion we swam into what used to be a spacious salon (or maybe it was a restaurant?). We found it in total ruins, with piles of debris and rubble. Broken devices, pipes, pieces of furniture, heaters. It was difficult to distinguish because everything was covered in silt. I moved my fin slightly and the silt raised, forming a thick brown muddy suspension which then made visibility poor. We continued to swim through the thick foggy ooze. The length of light coming from my torch was only twenty centimeters. Where do we go now?! We couldn’t see one another. Suddenly, as if on command, the three of us decided to switch off our torches. After a while we noticed a dim sunlight, delicately penetrating the depth of the water. This enabled us to see the vague, barely visible, outlines of window openings. A bit farther toward the stern, in a gap of a ruptured hull, we saw a strange object; its shape was unexpectedly well-preserved. It turned out to be a chandelier, which, as we later saw in photos of the Wilhelm Gustloff, hung in the ship’s lounge. Through the closed portholes we could see into the passenger cabins—mountains of rubble and unidentified remains. Certainly the clearest water and best visibility was at the stern. I could easily identify the reels, construction of the deck, curved bow hold, and stairs on both sides. Because the time we were able to spend at this depth was nearly up, we decided not to push our limits and withdrew from deeper penetration of the inside of the huge wreck. It was incredible to think that if the ship stood on its bow, two-thirds of its height would stick out above the water level. Later, when I was drawing the sketch of the wreck, I had to verify my observations with other divers. The exchange of these observations was, at times, quite emotional.

The Wilhelm Gustloff is, without doubt, the largest wreck in the Baltic Sea. It carried thousands of exiles who became tragic victims the minute the deadly torpedoes struck their ship. We were the first civil team of free-swimming divers who were privileged to examine the wreck. It was such a rare opportunity, it’s no wonder that each one of us was completely overwhelmed.
3. After so many years, was there still evidence of human tragedy and a human story when you explored the Wilhelm Gustloff?

Every descent we made to the wreck brought new discoveries and great emotions. Each one of us, even when exploring the same spots, would notice and focus on different things, have different impressions. Each would question different objects, or pieces of objects, like a cracked porcelain saucer. (Who was its owner? Did it belong with a lost cup in the cabinet of the Wilhelm Gustloff’s kitchen?) There were shreds of clothing. There were many shoes. (Were their owners running to safety in them?) There were military belts (maybe they belonged to young soldiers). There was a lovely plated little jug, stuffed with silk scarves, all tightly tucked inside. (Why would such scarves be packed inside a jar? Maybe the owner needed to save every bit of free space? Or was it of great sentimental value to him or her?) With time, the scarves had turned the color of brown silt.

The majority of objects and pieces of belongings that we saw were not on the actual wreck, but were scattered all around it. Most of them were very difficult, if not impossible, to identify. This was due to the disaster, time lapse, and the sea water. To me, every object, even if it was unrecognizable, would trigger my imagination, and, in my mind, I kept returning to the individual tragic experiences of their owners, fleeing from imminent danger of the approaching enemy, only to meet their tragic ends on the ship they hoped would take them to safety.

Because the Wilhelm Gustloff’s great mast had to be detonated and removed for safety reasons (it was sticking far too high above the fairway water level and was an obstruction for tankers), we had to remove all the navigation lamps and lighting devices from it. I thought to myself, maybe, just maybe, if they were all switched off during the voyage, perhaps submarine commander Marinesko wouldn’t have spotted the ship.

4. Several divers have explored the Wilhelm Gustloff. In what way do you feel that your dive and experience was unique?

Classic divers, the only ones to have explored the wreck before us, had very limited resources to thoroughly do the job due to defective and imperfect equipment existing and available at the time. They wore heavy metal helmets and iron shoes, and had to be connected to an air hose. Nevertheless, the number of myths, legends, and fantasies about the Wilhelm Gustloff wreck was growing and became quite impressive! That was, until 1973, the year we, as free-swimming scuba divers, were permitted to do the exploration. The wreck at the time was officially shrouded in secrecy. Its geographic position was classified and all the information was highly confidential.

Before we went on our dive exploration, we heard many crazy stories about the wreck from so-called eyewitnesses, previous classic divers, or foreign journalists. All the nonsense and myths called for verification! There was one constantly repeated “tip,” which alleged of a supposedly rectangular opening in the side of the wreck made by some secret “professionals.” This suggested that some uninvited guests had been trying to get their hands on some secret and valuable cargo. But neither I nor my fellow divers ever saw such a hole. Not even a trace of it or attempts at cutting it out by a burner.

Whenever conditions allowed, we were able to swim inside the wreck. Between crushed decks and what was left of interior corridors. I was also able to swim alongside the Gustloff and make close observations. Unlike those classic divers before us with metal helmets and iron shoes, who were unable to move freely (and thus unable to have a wide view of the lying wreck), I could see it from a ten-meter distance. Just as far as the visibility allowed. As a diver free from weighted and connected equipment, I was able to see the wreck from various angles and I could draw the sketch precisely. Of course, I consulted with my dive friends who took part in the exploration. It took me a sequence of separate dives to complete the sketch.

5. Although other people have investigated this part of history, you live in the region where the refugee evacuation took place. What do you think might have been misunderstood about the legend of the Amber Room or the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff?

In my opinion, it is hard to definitively state whether or not the Amber Room ever had a chance to be onboard the Wilhelm Gustloff. The possibility evokes great interest, even today. Unconfirmed rumors were circulating that the Amber Room was last seen after the Wilhelm Gustloff sank. What is certain though is that during the Allied Forces’ bombardment of Königsberg, the Amber Room was in Königsberg Castle. In the courtyard of the castle, a lot of melted amber and metal fittings that belonged to the Amber Room were found.

Until 1973, the torpedoing and sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff was considered an outstandingly heroic act. Captain Marinesko, the commander of the Soviet submarine who sank the Gustloff, has a monument in his name in Königsberg (now Russian Kaliningrad) and is still very honored and revered.

During our explorations on the wreck of the Wilhelm Gustloff, I remember expressions of disbelief and utter surprise on the faces of people (even those who knew the history of World War II really well) and their repeated questions: “Is it possible? Isn’t the Titanic the ship that had the highest number of victims?” And the answer was, “No, the largest maritime disaster is not the Titanic. On the Wilhelm Gustloff there were five or six times more victims; an entire city of people went down.”

It was only then that people learned of this enormous tragedy. And thirty years later, the famous German writer Günter Grass wrote a novel, Crabwalk, about it.
The research and investigation process for this novel was a global, collaborative effort that carried me to half a dozen countries. That said, any errors found herein are my own.

- Claus Pedersen: researched, translated, and traveled to Copenhagen and Brussels to meet with me.
- Agata Napiórska: met me on four separate trips to Warsaw, Gdynia, Gdańsk, and Kraków and connected me to many people and places.
- Polish divers Michał Rybicki and Jerzy Janczakowicz: assisted with my research and spent countless hours with me in Gdańsk, sharing unforgettable details.
- Michał Rybicki and Dorota Mierosławská: helped me retrace the steps of the millions of evacuees who ran for their lives through former East Prussia (now Poland) to the lagoon in Tolkmicko, Frombork (Frauenberg), and Nova Pasłka. They took me to the port in Gdynia (Göteborgen) to study the departure of the Wilhelm Gustloff and the geographic execution of Operation Hannibal.
- My father's cousin, Erika Demski, her husband, Theo Mayer: shared the incredible story of how she missed her own trip aboard the Wilhelm Gustloff and encouraged me to write about the disaster.
- Historian Bernhard Schlegelmilch: toured me through Berlin, digging up details of World War II.
- Deep-sea diver Leigh Bishop: shared with me the haunting details of his unforgettable experience diving the Wilhelm Gustloff in 2003.
- Rasa Aleksuniška and her son, Linas: shared the amazing story of her father, Eduardas Markulis, a twenty-two-year-old Lithuanian from Siauliai who survived the sinking.
- Ann Maria Lipacis and her brother, J. Ventenbergs: shared first-hand accounts and memoirs not only of surviving the sinking, but of losing their beloved mother, Antonija Liepins Ventenbergs, who remained on deck.
- Lorna MacEwen: shared personal details and photos with me of her mother, Marta Kopaite, who walked over minefields to Gotenhafen, boarded the Wilhelm Gustloff, and survived.
- Lance Robinson: shared the story of Helmer Laidroo, his mother who survived the sinking.
- Māti Kaarma: shared the story and background of his family who fled from Estonia. His grandparents, who opted for passage on the Gustloff, did not survive.
- Gertrud Baekby Madsen: shared a detailed account of her evacuation from Tilsit and the treacherous trek across the ice.
- Author and journalist, Cathryn J. Prince: answered countless e-mails and shared her research findings, contacts, and knowledge.
- Charlotte and William Peale: organized research material and read early drafts.

This novel was built with bricks from the following books, films, and resources:

- Abandoned and Forgotten: An Orphan Girl’s Tale of Survival During World War II, by Evelyne Tannehill.
- The Amber Room: The Fate of the World’s Greatest Lost Treasure, by Adrian Levy.
- Battleground Prussia: The Assault on Germany’s Eastern Front 1944–45, by Prit Buttar.
- Before the Storm: Memories of My Youth in Old Prussia, by Marjon Countess Dönhoff.
- Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin, by Timothy Snyder.
- The Captive Mind, by Czeslaw Milosz.
- Crabwalk, by Gunter Grass.
- The Cruellest Night: The Untold Story of One of the Greatest Maritime Tragedies of World War II, by Christopher Dobson, John Miller, and Ronald Payne.
- The Damned Don’t Drown: The Sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff, by Arthur V. Sellwood.
- Die große Flucht: Das Schicksal der Vertriebenen, by Guido Knopp.
- Die Gustloff-Katastrophe: Bericht eines Überlebenden, by Heinz Schön.
- Forgotten Land: Journeys Among the Ghosts of East Prussia, by Max Egremont.
- God, Give Us Wings, by Felicia Prekeris Brown.
- Handmade Shoes for Men, by László Vass and Magda Molnar.
- Lwów, A City Lost: Memories of a Cherished Childhood, by Eva Szybalski.
- The Painted Bird, by Jerzy Kosinski.
- The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe’s Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War, by Lynn H. Nicholas.
- Rose Petal Jam: Recipes and Stories from a Summer in Poland, by Beata Zatorska and Simon Target.
- Shoes: Their History in Words and Pictures, by Charlotte Yue and David Yue.
- Sinking the Gustloff: A Tragedy Exiled From Memory, by Marcus Kolga.
- The Vanished Kingdom: Travels Through the History of Prussia, by Heinz Schön.
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- Sinking the Gustloff: A Tragedy Exiled From Memory, by Marcus Kolga.

The following people and organizations contributed to my research and writing efforts:

- Henning Ahrens; the Bihr; Dr. Richard Butterwick Pawlikowski; Ulrike Dick; Angela Kaden; Helen Logvinov; Jeroen Noordhuis; Jonas Ohman; Xymena Petraszék; Julius Sakalauskas; Carol Stoltz.
- Ancestry.com; the Biala Kazimierz Museum of Lithuanian Culture; Bornholms Museum; Der Spiegel; the Federal Foundation of Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation in Berlin, Germany; Historical Museum of the City of Kraków; Inkwood Books; Kresy Siberia Virtual Museum; Letters of Note; the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius, Lithuania; the Museum of Occupation in Riga, Latvia; the Regional Historical Center of Eindhoven, Holland; the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center; Steuben Tours; the Wilhelm Gustloff Museum: www.wilhelmgustloffmuseum.com.
- Ulrich von Domarus; Irene Tshinkur East; Heidrun Gloza; Waltraud Lilischkis; Ellen Tschinkur Maybee; Eva Merten; Rose Rezas Petrus; Helga Reuter; Inge Bendrich Roedecker; Eva Dorn Rothchild; Willi Schäfer; Edith Spindl; Peter Weise; Horst Wotz. all Wilhelm Gustloff survivors.
- The greatest Wilhelm Gustloff archivist was undoubtedly Mr. Heinz Schön. Mr. Schön served as assistant purser on the Gustloff, witnessed and survived the sinking, and devoted much of his life to documenting the disaster. Heinz Schön passed away in 2013. At his request, his remains were taken to the bottom of the Baltic Sea to rest upon the sunken Gustloff. He is gone but his legacy and research remain a gift to us all.
The two maps here are included for reference for those readers who may be unfamiliar with the geographical landscape, and to allow for better comprehension of the Salt to the Sea content. At the top is the map of Europe in 1945, which includes East Prussia. The bottom map is that of present-day Europe.
Born and raised in Michigan in a family of artists, readers, and music lovers, RUTA SEPETYS is an internationally acclaimed, #1 New York Times bestselling author of historical fiction. Her novels Between Shades of Gray, Out of the Easy, and Salt to the Sea are Carnegie Medal nominees, and have been published across fifty-two countries and thirty-six languages. Ruta lives with her family in Nashville, Tennessee.

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Or follow her on Twitter @RutaSepetys

Also by
RUTA SEPETYS

Praise for Between Shades of Gray
“Few books are beautifully written, fewer still are important; this novel is both.”
— The Washington Post

“Please read this small window into a tragedy.”
— NPR

A New York Times notable book
An International Bestseller
A New York Times Bestseller
A Carnegie Medal Nominee

Praise for Out of the Easy
“A haunting peek at the life of a teenage girl in 1950s New Orleans.”
— Entertainment Weekly

“Street-smart, literary and compassionate.”
— The Wall Street Journal

A New York Times Bestseller
A Carnegie Medal Nominee
A New York Times Editors’ Choice Novel