

Salt to the Sea

By Ruta Sepetys

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 the 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 mittened hand in mine.

And then we both heard it in the distance.

Bang.