

BOOKS

'It's not really a love story, but a story about love'

BRIDGET GALTON meets the Jewish Chronicle's literary editor Gerald Jacobs whose debut novel of familial love is set against the backdrop of the Holocaust

As literary editor of the Jewish Chronicle, Gerald Jacobs understands more than most the devastating effect of the Second World War on the Jewish diaspora.

Twenty years ago, he wrote a true story "with a novel-like narrative", about Hungarian Holocaust survivor Miklos Hammer.

Now in a kind of reverse, he's penned "a fiction written in the style of a true story."

Set in Baghdad, Budapest and England, *Nine Love Letters* (Quartet £20) charts the violent uprooting of two Jewish families.

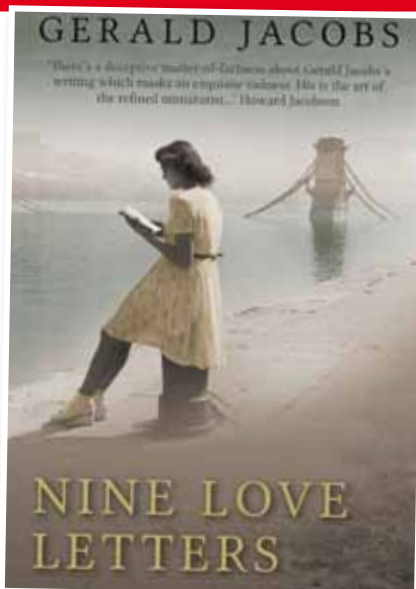
"It has a strong factual background based on actual things that happened in these two capitals, which are 1600 miles apart but at that point had striking parallels," says the Muswell Hill resident.

"Both had substantial Jewish populations established over centuries, both were completely ruptured by this big catastrophe."

Jacobs' 1995 book *Sacred Games* had taken him to Budapest where Hammer was a medical student before being sent to Auschwitz.

For *Nine Love Letters* he delved into the Jewish community in Iraq which he knew less about.

Based around a series of letters between parents, children and lovers, it describes the invasion of the Hungarian capital in 1944 and the liquidation of the country's 800,000 Jews through the eyes of young Anna Weisz.



In Iraq, Yusuf Haroun's family are caught up in the farhud or pogrom against the Jewish population in 1941.

"Life was never quite the same again in Jewish Baghdad," says Jacobs.

"It had been an immensely flourishing culture but over the following years some went to the emerging Jewish state and many to India, Muslim neighbours were begging them not to go. Those who left were very nostalgic for the place."

Liberated from Belsen by the British army, Anna falls for an English officer but keeps her Jewish

past secret from their daughter, becoming 'more English than the English.'

Meanwhile Yusuf and wife Farah live with relatives in London, becoming naturalised citizens and running a family business.

The book's epic sweep takes in themes of Jewish identity but also different kinds of love expressed through letters.

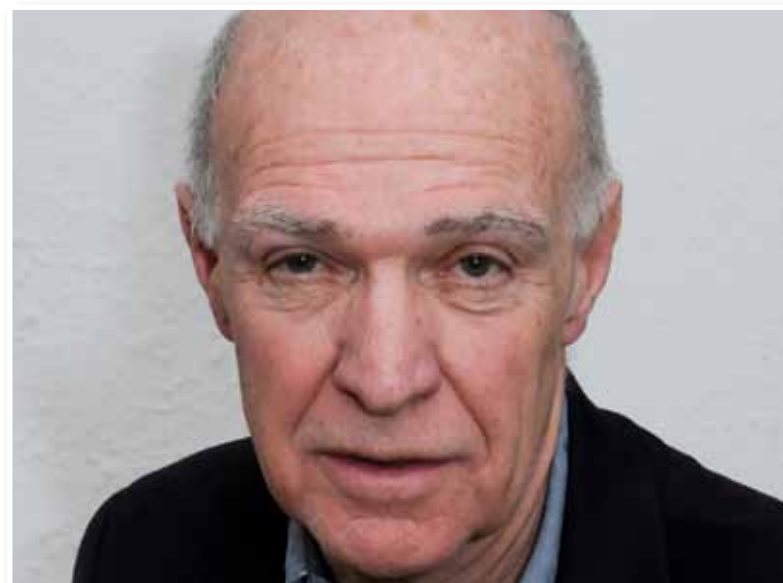
"It's not so much a love story but a story about love," says Jacobs. "Love letters in normal parlance means erotic exchanges but it can be a mother to her daughter or a daughter to her father. I wanted to write about familial love including romantic love."

Jacobs' whose first book was an authorised biography of Judi Dench back in 1985 before she hit the Hollywood big time, accepts it's now "almost a cliché" to set a book around the Holocaust, but recalls that wasn't always the case.

"Sacred Games was turned down by 13 publishers before it was accepted," he says.

"They didn't want to know, they thought the Holocaust was too horrific, 'people won't want to read that'. But the film *Schindler's List* changed that."

Jacobs was at the centre of what he calls "an interesting moment" 40 years after the war when his postbag at the JC was "inundated with survivors asking 'can you publish my memoir, find me an agent or write it yourself?'"



"The majority of survivors had suppressed their experiences – some hadn't even told their families. It was like a pressure cooker and you can identify a moment when, because of indications of mortality, that changed. They hadn't spoken before because they wanted to get on with their lives and I think they couldn't bear the thought of not being believed. It was an unbelievable experience, and they couldn't bear someone discrediting it."

While some memoirs were badly written or showed gaps in memory, Hammer was different. "This sleek confident looking businessman wrote down bullet points on a piece of paper of what had happened to him – I checked and everything was true. He had a virtual photographic memory, spoke six languages. It was such an incredibly important story I had to write it."

The son of a strict Rabbi who taught himself English from the radio, Hammer endured a "grisly cooks tour of concentration camps" and was on the way to Dachau when he met a strange Englishman (probably a spy) called Peter Howard who died en route. When the wagon doors opened, as Jews were ushered to one side, Hammer gave the

Englishman's name as his own and upon liberation in April 1945 was repatriated to a country he had never been to. The English promptly incarcerated him alongside top Nazis including Hitler's press secretary Otto Dietrich.

Jacob's next project is a fictional autobiography of a Jewish gangster in 50s London, tangentially connected to his father, who was a photographer in Brixton capturing the Windrush Caribbean immigrants of the 50s and 60s.

"His studio became iconic, a background of a Tahitian scene with artificial flowers became famous in households all over the Caribbean, of relatives stiffly posed in nurses and bus conductor uniforms in a way that announces 'here I am'."

Meanwhile *Nine Love Letters* has echoes with Hammer's story and perhaps many other survivors.

"Everything that happened to him seemed to be the worst thing that could possibly happen and yet there was worse."

"I was conscious that we live our lives as though there are lots of certainties, but everything is so accidental. Things aren't planned and pre-ordained, yet life is still lived as if they were."

BLUE SKIES OVER BERLIN

Reinventing yourself in post-war London

"I try to describe people's journeys in what I hope are unusual and interesting stories. This book is a journey of conscience," says John Steinberg of his latest novel *Blue Skies Over Berlin*. (Silvertail £9.99)

The ex banker and Hampstead resident only started writing "seriously" in 2008 after meeting TV Director and writer Ray Kilby at a Bafta event. They collaborated on two successful plays and Steinberg says his 2014 debut novel, *Shimon* owed a debt to his playwrighting experience.

"Plays are all about dialogue and hopefully I write dialogue that's quite strong. What I'm trying to achieve is that each chapter is like a different scene in a play. Moving things along

with less description and more dialogue makes the novel flow quickly."

Blues Skies Over Berlin is the remarkable journey of a repressed, naive young woman who moves to London in 1956 trying to reinvent herself. Hailing from an aristocratic German family, when her beloved father dies she changes her name to the anglicised 'Charlotte Brown' and heads to England leaving a troubled past behind her.

Yet as the artist stumbles into different jobs and relationships her naivety takes her to unexpected places and the past keeps catching up with her, until she finds herself involved in a criminal investigation.

Charlotte's story unfolds between the aristocratic art world of Mayfair and East London's Petticoat Lane market.

"It felt right to make art the topic. As a writer I know it's easy to escape reality by working in the arts, so I liked the idea for someone running away from reality. If you look at the atmosphere of London in the mid-50s with aristocratic rogues who had fought in the war and developed dubious overseas connections, the art theme felt fitting."

Steinberg took inspiration from people born around that time who might have known his fictional characters.

"When I write I mustn't be influenced by anything that's



■ John Steinberg Picture: DIETER PERRY

ever happened because they are purely fiction, but I like to hear people asking 'Oh, did that really happen?', to me that's an achievement."

Blue Skies Over Berlin could mark the first of a series of

books based on self-discovery. His third novel is in the hands of the publishers and he's got an idea for another. "a semi-autobiographical book, very much a semi as my life isn't that interesting!"