

## Books

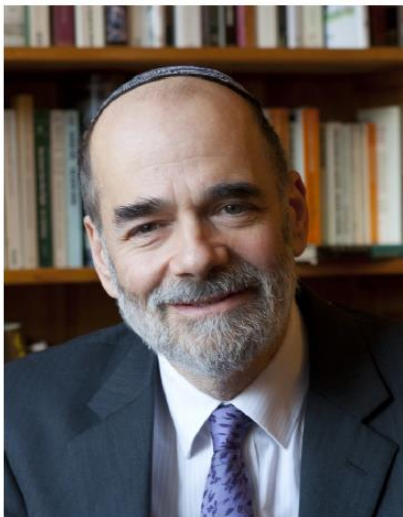
### My Dear Ones: One Family and the Final Solution by Jonathan Wittenberg

Review by Andrew Sanger

This is not a lightweight book, nor a feel-good story, yet it is a page-turner, and as gripping as a thriller. Its remarkable starting point is the discovery, by Jonathan Wittenberg and his cousin, of a bag of family letters and papers at an aunt's Jerusalem flat. He pulls one out. It's written in German and the date is 1938.

It seems particularly opportune that this rare legacy should come down to Jonathan Wittenberg, of all people. Rabbi of New North London Synagogue and the senior Masorti rabbi in the UK, Wittenberg is well known as a passionate and stirring public speaker. Although he is the author of several books, somehow he has made less of a reputation as a writer. That is set to change with the publication of this extraordinary, powerful and important work. The paperback edition is to be published in May.

In fact, he does not start with the letters. He starts by explaining that both his parents were German Jews. The family in question is the Freimanns, rather than the Wittenbergs. A useful family tree



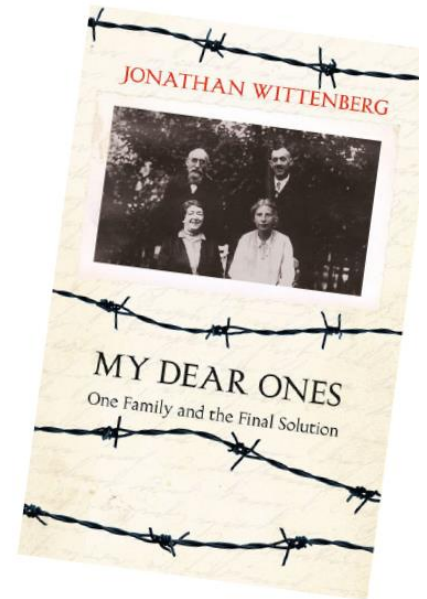
inside the cover shows that Jonathan's grandmother, Ella Wittenberg, was a daughter of the distinguished scholar, Rabbi Jacob Freimann, himself the oldest son of Rabbi Avraham Chaim Freimann. Most of the letters are between Ella's generation – her sisters Sophie, Wally and Trude, and brothers Ernst and Alfred – and their devoted, widowed mother, Regina.

At first sight, one anticipates a personal record of Nazi atrocities. We soon discover how much more is revealed, as Wittenberg, detective-like, reconstructs their movements and circumstances. From the dizzying perspective of the present day, we find ourselves looking back not into horror, but into the day-to-day world of a good, loving, happy pre-War family. Little by little, we watch them and all that is theirs being gradually destroyed.

We follow as they accustom themselves to things, make the best of things: the steady expropriation of their assets, the heaping up of restrictions and humiliations and privations. We see endless form-filling, payment of swingeing fees, fearful delays, the frustration of completing Kafkaesque applications for life-or-death exit papers that are eventually refused. And their stoicism, dignity, patience; and concern for one another.

Wittenberg tries to share their emotions. "They must have felt...", "She would have wanted...". It is understandable that he longs to fill the gaps. But the reader needs no encouragement to imagine how people "must have" felt.

As well as giving heartrending glimpses into the steady attrition of 1930s Jewish life, Wittenberg expertly lays out the historical context in which his own family, and



a million others, and the Jewish people as a whole, are being driven towards a destiny they cannot know.

We learn about the curious 'Paltreu' arrangements, under which initially Jews could pay the Nazis, via the Trust (which had to use the money to buy German export goods), to let them go to Palestine; we learn when and why the Germans switched from pushing Jews eastward to outright extermination; how the British obstructed their efforts to escape to Palestine.

If there is a forlorn grain of hope to be found anywhere in Wittenberg's tale, it is on the level of unforeseen consequences. Just out of sight of the letters themselves, we glimpse a new Exodus – Jewish entrepreneurs, musicians, academics, doctors – frantic to leave Germany, who actually succeed, fanning out across the world in search of refuge. By our own day, these escapees have established new generations. In America, Britain and Israel, are living grandchildren of those Freimann family members whose visas came before it was too late.

The central character, already a grandmother when the Nazis come to power, is Regina Freimann (Jonathan's great-grandmother). Living in Berlin, she is reluctant to join the three of her children who have reached Palestine.

She fears she may become a burden to them. In the nick of time, though, she is rescued from Nazi Germany by her daughter Sophie and son-in-law Josef and taken to the 'safety' of Czechoslovakia, thereby sealing all their fates in the worst way.

Among the final letters in the bag was one written by Sophie to her brother Alfred in Palestine. It's 1943. She writes that she, Josef and Regina are being deported to Theresienstadt and from there must expect to be sent to Poland: "We want to say farewell to you all and tell you, my dear ones, where you may be able to look for us after the war."

Jonathan Wittenberg does indeed look for them, retracing routes, visiting last places, accompanied by his own children. There are a few letters after the war. In 1948, Ella, Jonathan's grandmother, wrote to Ernst in New York with the news that their brother Alfred, having escaped the Nazis, has been murdered by Arabs in the attack on a convoy of medical staff. British soldiers, Jonathan's father tells him, stood and watched.

*My Dear Ones* is more, even, than a major contribution to the literature on the Holocaust. It is the profoundly affecting story of one family whose fortunes have embodied the whole destiny and drama of European Jewry in the 20th century.

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*My Dear Ones: One Family and the Final Solution, by Jonathan Wittenberg (William Collins, hardback £16.99, paperback £8.99)*