Author Dana Sachs began her career as a journalist. In 2000, she wrote her first book, a memoir about her years in Vietnam, *The House on Dream Street: Memoir of an American Woman in Vietnam*. Since then, she has written three more books about Vietnam: *Two Cakes Fit for a King: Folktales from Vietnam*, *If You Lived Here* and *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam*. But in her latest novel, she breaks from Vietnam yet still writes about a very important part of Asian-American history. Asian Jewish Life recently sat down with Dana Sachs to talk about her new novel, writing about Asia and Jews, and how her background, particularly her Eastern focus, has shaped her work.

Asian Jewish Life: Congratulations on the publication of your new novel, *The Secret of the Nightingale Palace* (William Morrow, 2013)! It’s a heartrending story about Goldie, an 85-year-old grandmother, and Anna, her 35-year-old granddaughter. But it’s also the story of Goldie’s early adult life and is the perfect Asian Jewish love story a couple times over. In your first novel, *If You Lived Here* (Morrow, 2008), you wrote about Vietnam, where you lived in the 1990s, but not about Judaism. Can you discuss how you made these choices—writing about Jewish characters in your latest novel but not in your first?

Dana Sachs: First, thanks so much for your kind words about the book. As for the question of how I made the decision to focus on Judaism in one novel and not the other, *The Secret of the Nightingale Palace* reflects, in some ways, on the history of my own family. I wanted to go deeper into the experience of Jewish Americans and the challenges that they faced in the early- and mid-20th Century. One thing that particularly interests me is the chasm that divided Jews from different backgrounds at that time. Those who emigrated in the 19th Century, often from Germany, tended to be wealthier and better educated. Later generations of Jewish immigrants, often from Eastern Europe and Russia, were more likely to come from peasant backgrounds and have less money and education. These economic and cultural differences caused resentments and animosity. My own parents experienced a lot of problems when they got married because my mother came from an older, more established family and my father from a more recent one. Both sides were suspicious and quick to judge the other.

AJL: In the 1990s, you and your sister made *Which Way is East: Notebooks from Vietnam*, a documentary that introduces Americans to the human beings on the other side of the war. Did your collaboration with your sister inspire the relationship between Anna and her sister Sadie in *The Secret of the Nightingale Palace*? Has your sister read your new novel? If so, what does she think about the sisters’ relationship in the story?

DS: I have a very close relationship with my sister, Lynne, which is similar in some ways to Anna’s relationship with Sadie. I wanted to get at that closeness and intensity in the novel. My sister and I have little fights with each other sometimes, but we always deal with it quickly and move on. Even though my sister and I are quite different from the characters of Anna and Sadie, I wanted to capture those little flares that can spark between siblings and then, just as quickly, die out. As to the question of what she thought of the novel, she told me she loved it, so I hope she did!

AJL: Your memoir, *The House on Dream Street* (Algonquin, 2000), chronicles your many great stories over the years, but I also had other stories I wanted to write. It was a challenge to write a book that didn’t have the word “Vietnam” in it, though! And, as you noted, I couldn’t get away from Asia entirely. I think it’s in my blood.
years in Vietnam, including a surprise romantic twist. Did your own story inspire some of the relationships in The Secret of the Nightingale Palace?

DS: I’d like to say that it’s all fiction, but we bring ourselves into every story, don’t we? The romantic relationships in The Secret of the Nightingale Palace come from my imagination, but my imagination, of course, is fueled in part by my own experience.

AJL: One of the most impressive parts of The House on Dream Street is how so effortlessly you adapt to Vietnamese culture, which twenty years ago was no small feat. But when your future husband visits, you grow a little frustrated by his refusal to eat pork and how that prevented him from assimilating as well as you had. It’s interesting that in Nightingale, Goldie is the only character in her family who doesn’t eat pork or shellfish. Did you base Goldie’s eating preferences on your husband’s? In your home do you keep a kosher-style kitchen?

DS: In many ways, Goldie is based on my own grandmother, Rose, who turned 100 last year. Goldie’s story is fiction, but there is a lot of my grandmother in Goldie’s personality. Our family practices Reform Judaism (and my grandmother actually converted to Catholicism many years ago—but that’s another story entirely!). Rose has always turned up her nose at eating pork and shellfish, but she would totally deny that her “dislike” has anything to do with religion. I’ve long wondered if it stems from her background, though.

AJL: In Nightingale, Goldie and Anna grow up in Memphis, which is where you were raised and which has a large and vibrant Jewish community. Did you have the same desires as Goldie’s character when you became of age—to travel the world and live outside Memphis in your adult years?

DS: Absolutely. When I was a child, I thought that Memphis was the most boring place in the world. Once I became a teenager, though, and started learning about the city’s history, culture, and music, I realized how lucky I was to have been born there. I grew up listening to the Blues, eating barbeque, and taking boat rides on the Mississippi River. My eighth grade class visited Faulkner’s house in Oxford, Mississippi. My uncle was Elvis Presley’s veterinarian. Plus, my family, on both sides, has deep roots there. I wouldn’t trade that history for anything. I’ve long wondered if it stems from her background, though.

AJL: And in your two novels, you write about non-traditional families and about death. How did you come to write about these topics?

DS: My own family is non-traditional, so that’s normal for me. My parents divorced when I was eight and my childhood became two worlds, my mom’s and my dad’s. It wasn’t always easy, but I value what I learned in both of their worlds and the fact that my life became a mixture of the two. Maybe because of that, I find any kind of mixing-up to be deeply interesting and valuable, so I gravitate toward those kinds of situations in my writing. As for death, well, it’s a great big terror for me. To be perfectly honest, I think I drag myself toward it in my writing as a way of preparing myself for the inevitable fact that I will lose people I love.

AJL: At the end of The House on Dream Street, you travel back to Vietnam as a wife and mother. Have you and your
family spent much time in Asia? Have you taught your sons about Vietnam and other parts of Asia? They must think it’s very cool to have a mom who has enjoyed such a rich experience at a time when few Americans lived or even traveled to Vietnam.

**DS:** I don’t think my boys, who are 12 and 15, think that there’s anything particularly cool about their mom! They do value the fact that they have travelled, though, and they love to explore the world. I feel very lucky that we’ve been able to give them those opportunities. It has affected them in so many surprising ways. They’re open-minded and brave and curious, all of which are qualities we need to have in this world. Travelling also makes them able to see things from different perspectives, which is fundamentally important. When we were living in Vietnam, my kids went to an international school, so they had friends from all over the world and they spent a lot of time talking about cultural differences. One night, my older son, who was eight at the time, got up to go to the bathroom during dinner. When he came back to the table, his 5-year-old brother said, “You know, in France that’s considered very rude.” Of course, he was trying to one-up his brother, but I love the fact that he was able to think about manners from the perspective of a French person.

**AJL:** Can you discuss what you are working on now?

**DS:** My husband, who is a college professor, had a grant to teach in Hungary last year, so we lived for a semester in Budapest. As a result, I’m writing a new novel that takes place in that city. The story is about an aging American diplomat who begins to suffer from a form of dementia, and how his family comes together from other parts of the world to help him. The project has given me a great opportunity to research a wide range of subjects. For one thing, I’m learning as much as I can about classical music (the diplomat is a pianist as well). I’m also delving deeply into the history of the Holocaust. I’m interested in the issue of how Jews today live with the facts of what happened back then. Right now, the novel is called *Happy in Budapest*, though the titles of my books often seem to change along the way. 

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