



The picture that spawned a life-long obsession for Steven Robins

Using science to one's own end

As a young boy growing up in Port Elizabeth in the 1960s and 1970s, Steven Robins was haunted by an old photograph of three unknown women on a table in the dining room. Only later did he learn that the women were his father's mother and sisters, photographed in Berlin in 1937, before they were killed in the Holocaust.

Steven's father, who had fled Nazi Germany before it was too late, never spoke about the fate of his family who remained there.

Robins became obsessed with finding out what happened to the women, but had little to go on. In time he stumbled on official facts in museums in Washington DC and Berlin, and later he discovered almost 100 letters sent to his father and uncle from the family in Berlin during the Nazi terror.

The women in the photograph could now tell their story.

THE year my father was imprisoned, in 1933, Hitler appointed his favourite racial scientist, Dr Eugen Fischer, as rector of the Friedrich Wilhelm University (now Humboldt University). Fischer was already the director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics (KWI-A) in Berlin, and one of the signatories of the "Loyalty Oath of German Professors to Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist State".

By the late 1930s, with Hitler's unequivocal support, Fischer became one of the most influential scientists in the Nazis' implementation of eugenics programmes, which included the forced sterilisation and euthanising of mentally and physically disabled people. The discrimination against and murder of the Reich's Jews, which included my family, was underpinned by the science of anthropology, and by eugenics in particular.

The sciences of anthropology and eugenics colluded with biologically infected state programmes that claimed to improve the health and welfare of national populations but, in the process, sent those deemed unworthy of belonging to a race or population to their deaths.

In the words of political philosopher, Giorgio Agam-

ben, "For the first time in history, the possibilities of the social sciences are made known, and at once it becomes possible both to protect life and to authorise a holocaust."

This is the tragic story of the complicity of Western Enlightenment thinking in the genocidal violence of the last century. A significant strand of this story, somewhat surprisingly, begins, not in the heart of metropolitan Europe, but in a remote section of the colonial periphery of southern Africa.

During my 2012 visit to Williston, northern Cape, in search of Eugen Robinski's legacy to the town, I stumbled on the footprint of the other Eugen. Like so many of my discoveries on this journey into the past, this encounter had an uncanny quality to it.

Basters

It was on this visit that I learnt about how the mixed-race Basters, despite living under the protection of the Rhenish missionaries at Amandelboom, were dispossessed of their land in the 1860s by trekboer pastoralists and white commercial wool farmers. Losing access to their grazing lands, many had to move northwards, eventually settling in Rehoboth in South West Africa, in 1870.

In 1884, South West Africa became a colony of the German Empire, and the Rehoboth

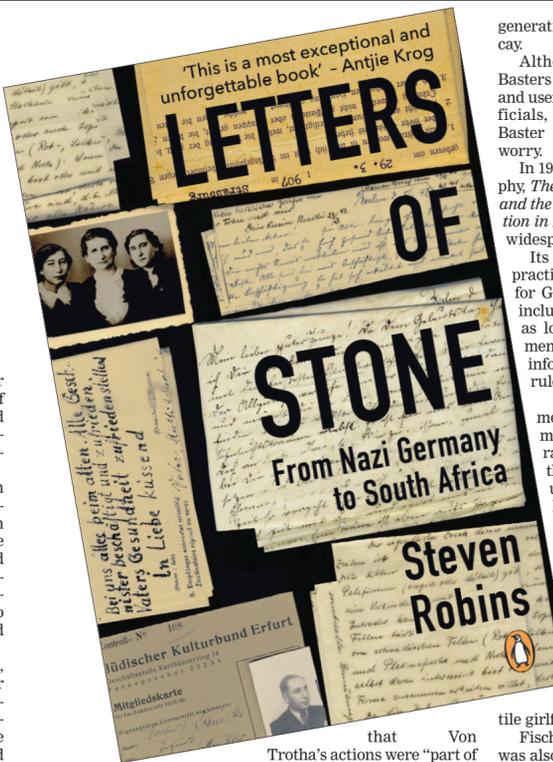
Basters were treated thereafter as an intermediary class of colonial subjects, sandwiched between the indigenous population and German colonial authorities, the Herero rebellion erupted and was brutally suppressed, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 24 000 to 100 000 Herero between 1904 and 1907, and 10 000 Nama.

In a letter written in 1904, the German General Lothar von Trotha outlined his strategy for dealing with this rebellion: "I believe that the (Herero) nation as such should be annihilated, or, if this is not possible by tactical measures, (they) have to be expelled from the country... This will be possible if the waterholes from Grootfontein to Gobabis are occupied. The constant movement of our troops will enable us to find the small groups of the nation who have moved backwards and destroy them gradually."

Von Trotha eventually defeated the Herero at the Battle of Waterberg in August of that year, driving them into the Omaheke Desert, where most of them died of thirst and hunger. The survivors of this massacre, the majority of whom were women and children, were herded to detention cen-

tres such as the notorious Shark Island concentration camp off Lüderitz, where they worked as slave labourers for the German military and settlers. Prisoners were categorised into groups designating their suitability for work, and issued death certificates even before they died, indicating their "death by exhaustion following privation". Many interned Herero died of disease, overwork or malnutrition, with estimates of the mortality rate varying between 45 and 74%.

It took over a century, until July last year, for the German government to acknowledge



trotha's actions were "part of a race war" that culminated in the first genocide of the twentieth century – a trial run for a genocide that would occur two decades later in Europe.

German colonial rule continued in South West Africa until 1915, when it was invaded by South African forces during World War I. When the war ended in 1918, South Africa took over administration of the territory, a situation that continued until Namibia achieved independence in 1990.

By the time Fischer arrived in Rehoboth in 1908, the colony had already assimilated popular eugenics ideas that racially mixed peoples were politically unreliable, potentially dangerous, and subject to cultural de-

generation and biological decay.

Although the Rehoboth Basters continued to be loyal and useful allies to German officials, the possibility of a Baster rebellion remained a worry.

In 1913, Fischer's ethnography, *The Bastards of Rehoboth and the Problem of Miscegenation in Man*, was published to widespread acclaim.

Its appendix provides practical recommendations for German colonial policy, including the use of Basters as low-level officials, foremen and native police to reinforce German colonial rule.

Fischer also recommends that the ban on mixed marriages and racial miscegenation in the German colonies be upheld, which would later influence Nazi laws to promote "the protection of German blood and honour" through the Nazi Marriage Act of 1935 and what became the Nuremberg Laws. These laws forced my father to hide his relationships with his general girlfriends in Erfurt.

Fischer's study in Rehoboth was also deployed by National Socialists to support the idea that the recessive genes of racially mixed populations led to physiological, psychological and intellectual degeneration.

By the late 1930s, Fischer was one of Germany's most influential scientists, with his institute in Berlin laying the foundations for Nazi eugenics that would find their ultimate expression in the Final Solution.

In a public address on July 29, 1933, Fischer offered his position on the Jewish question. Titled *The Concept of the Volkish State, Considered Biologically*, the lecture laid out the following viewpoint: That there are physical and intellectual differences no one

can objectively deny. I am not pronouncing a value judgement when I declare this. I even go so far as to say that a nation mixed and crossed equally of Aryan and Jewish components could theoretically create a very credible culture, but it would never be the same as one that grew on purely German national soil; it would not be a German culture, but an entirely different, half-Oriental one.

Fischer's position on Jews as a foreign body in the German Volk allowed him to promote his institute as Germany's foremost architect of racial-classification policies, including the notorious "genetic and race science certificates of descent".

Fischer was also appointed a judge for Berlin's Appellate Genetic Health Court, thereby helping to implement the Sterilisation Law of 1933 to combat hereditary medical conditions.

Fischer's story provides sobering lessons for science, and for my own discipline of anthropology. He was an ambitious man who believed that scientific expertise ought to determine state policies, but he had struggled to influence policy during the Weimar Republic period, because of the accountability structures of liberal democracy.

Policy

To influence policy one had to lobby and pressure parliamentarians, which was a slow and laborious process. The Nazis' rise to power presented him with unprecedented opportunities to short-circuit all of this.

In no time he had a direct line to the most powerful state officials. As director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin, Fischer and his colleagues offered to provide the Nazis with scientific expertise to guide their eugenics policies.

In return, Fischer attained unprecedented access to state resources for research. Medical scientists and doctors be-

came virtual gods during the Third Reich. Their expertise was seen to hold the key to the modern eugenicist state so desired by the Nazis.

There are striking similarities in the ways officials and scientists such as Fischer classified European Jews and the Rehoboth Basters.

The Basters' unstable, in-between status led German colonial officials to vacillate between viewing them as loyal subjects and potentially dangerous troublemakers.

Jews in Europe occupied a similar position and were often seen as constituting a political threat to the nation, either as communists, or rootless cosmopolitans and unpatriotic capitalists. Their dual loyalties meant they could never be trusted. Like the Basters, Jews had also tried to subvert doubts about their patriotism by fighting the wars of their political masters.

My grandfather, David Robinski, fought for the Germans in World War I only to become disillusioned with the Kaiser and his military exploits. The payback for his loyalty to Germany was the removal of his citizenship and his execution in the forests of Riga.

Through Fischer's work, a barbaric and lethal science incubated in the colonial laboratories of southern Africa had boomeranged back into the heartland of "civilised Europe".

● This is an extract from *Letters of Stone* by Steven Robins published by Penguin.

● Robins is a professor in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the University of Stellenbosch. He has written on a wide range of topics, including *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the politics of land and identity, and social movements and popular politics in South Africa*. Apart from his academic writings, he is a regular newspaper contributor on issues of public concern.



An artist's impression of Planet 9, which could sit at the edge of our solar system. PICTURE: CALTECH

MARCIA DUNN

CAPE CANAVERAL: Scientists reported last week they finally had "good evidence" for Planet X, a true ninth planet on the fringes of our solar system.

The gas giant is thought to be almost as big as Neptune and orbiting billions of kilometres beyond Neptune's path – distant enough to take 10 000 to 20 000 years to circle the sun.

This Planet 9, as the two California Institute of Technology researchers call it, has not been

Good evidence of Planet 9 out there

spotted yet. They base their findings on mathematical and computer modelling, and anticipate its discovery via telescope within five years or less.

The two reported on their research in the *Astronomical Journal* because they wanted people to help them look for it.

"We could have stayed quiet and quietly spent the next five years searching the skies our-

selves and hoping to find it. But I would rather somebody find it sooner, than me find it later," astronomer Mike Brown said.

"I want to understand where it is, and I think this will help." Once it's detected, Brown insists there will be no Pluto-style planetary debate. Brown ought to know; he's the so-called Pluto killer who helped lead the charge against

Pluto's planetary status in 2006. (It's now officially considered a dwarf planet.)

His colleague in this latest Planet 9 report, also from Caltech in Pasadena, is planetary scientist Konstantin Batygin.

"For the first time in more than 150 years, there's good evidence that the planetary census of the solar system is incomplete," Batygin said,

referring to Neptune's discovery as Planet 8.

The two shaped their prediction on the fact that six objects in the icy Kuiper Belt, or Twilight Zone on the far reaches of the solar system, appear to be influenced by only one thing: a real planet.

"This is a prediction. What we have found is a gravitational signature of Planet 9

lurking in the outskirts of the solar system," Batygin said. "We have not found the object itself," he stressed, adding that the actual discovery when it happens will be "era-defining".

"We have felt a great disturbance in the force."

Depending on where this Planet 9 is in its egg-shaped orbit, a space telescope may be needed to confirm its presence. Or, good backyard telescopes may spot it, if the planet is relatively closer to us in its swing around the sun. –ANA-AP