

Finally a sad mystery could be unravelled

SUZANNE BELLING

Letters of Stone - from Nazi Germany to South Africa

Steven Robins (Penguin, Random House, South Africa R250)

During his childhood in Port Elizabeth, Steven Robins - now a professor in the department of sociology and social anthropology at the University of Stellenbosch - continuously looked at a photograph of three women in a strategic place on the dining room table.

The photograph was shrouded in mystery and the silence of Steven's father, who had successfully fled Nazi Germany.

The three women were his father's mother, Cecilie and his sisters, Edith and Hildegard, about whom his father, Herbert Robinski, never spoke.

When Robinski settled in South Africa in 1936 and his younger brother, Arthur, in the former

Northern Rhodesia, the family, including another brother, Siegfried, was left behind to perish at the hands of the Nazis in Auschwitz and Riga.

Robins tried to research their fate and had a revelation in 2012 when Arthur's children, cleaning out their father's flat in Sea Point, stumbled upon a cache of old letters, written mostly by Cecilie to her sons in Africa. She outlined the details of their heartbreaking lives and the futile efforts to complete papers for the family to escape.

For Robins, this brought his ill-fated story to life. When the letters lost their optimism and suddenly stopped, the audible silence told what had become of Robins' family.

The book is a story of discovery on Robins' part, exploring the global rise of eugenics and racial science before the Second World War.

Most of all, this book is a poignant reconstruction of a family trapped in an increasingly terrifying and deadly Nazi state and of the immense pressure on Steven's father in faraway South Africa, which forced him to retreat into silence.

