

# Powerful, extraordinary narrative

LETTERS OF STONE  
- FROM NAZI GERMANY TO  
SOUTH AFRICA

Steven Robins  
Loot.co.za (R189)  
Penguin



REVIEW: Karin Schimke

THERE is no easy way into and through the telling of a family history when the story has been shaped by intergenerational trauma.

At every turn there is a trap: an alienating adherence to fact and detail at the one extreme; mawkishness, sentimentality or spluttering outrage at the other. Robins has avoided every one of them.

Perhaps the fact that almost 30 years have passed since this South African anthropologist became interested in the story of his father's family has helped to shape this extraordinary narrative. Perhaps what is necessary to tell a story of such import with such clarity is time: the slow accrual and organisation of information, the gradual realisation of the vastness of what shaped you, the gradual integration of the complex interwovenness of identity and once-removed emotions, guilt, anger, fear and despair.

Robins's father Herbert never spoke about his childhood as a German Jew in Berlin and Robins never asked. Until it was almost too late.

Herbert was 82 in 1989 when it first occurred to Robins to interview him. Herbert had emigrated from Berlin in Germany to Port Elizabeth in South Africa in 1936 after the Nazis came to power.

Central to *Letters of Stone* is a photograph of three women that stood in Robins's Port Elizabeth home when he was a boy, but about which no one ever

spoke. During his interview with his father, which covered "every aspect of his life in Poland and Germany", he never once asked about the photograph of the three women who it turned out were his grandmother Cecilie, flanked by his aunts Edith and Hildegard. Cecilie had five children with her husband David. Their son Artur emigrated from Berlin two years after Herbert and settled in what was then Northern Rhodesia. This was the only family Robins knew.

"(T)here seemed to be," he writes, "an unstated agreement that the rest of (my father's) family were not to be spoken about." Once his father died, Robins began a piecemeal – and often oddly serendipitous – retrieval of his father's family history. One small revelation would lead to another, one clue would unlock a previously invisible door. The very shortened version of this story is: the family that remained in Germany died. And from these very bare and terribly brittle bones, Robins has constructed a behemoth of interconnected social and political histories across the globe in the 20th century.

This book's value does not rest purely on the intrinsic power of its central story. Its value is in the depth and scope that it reaches through the veritable pinhole of one family's story.

Robins's experience as both an

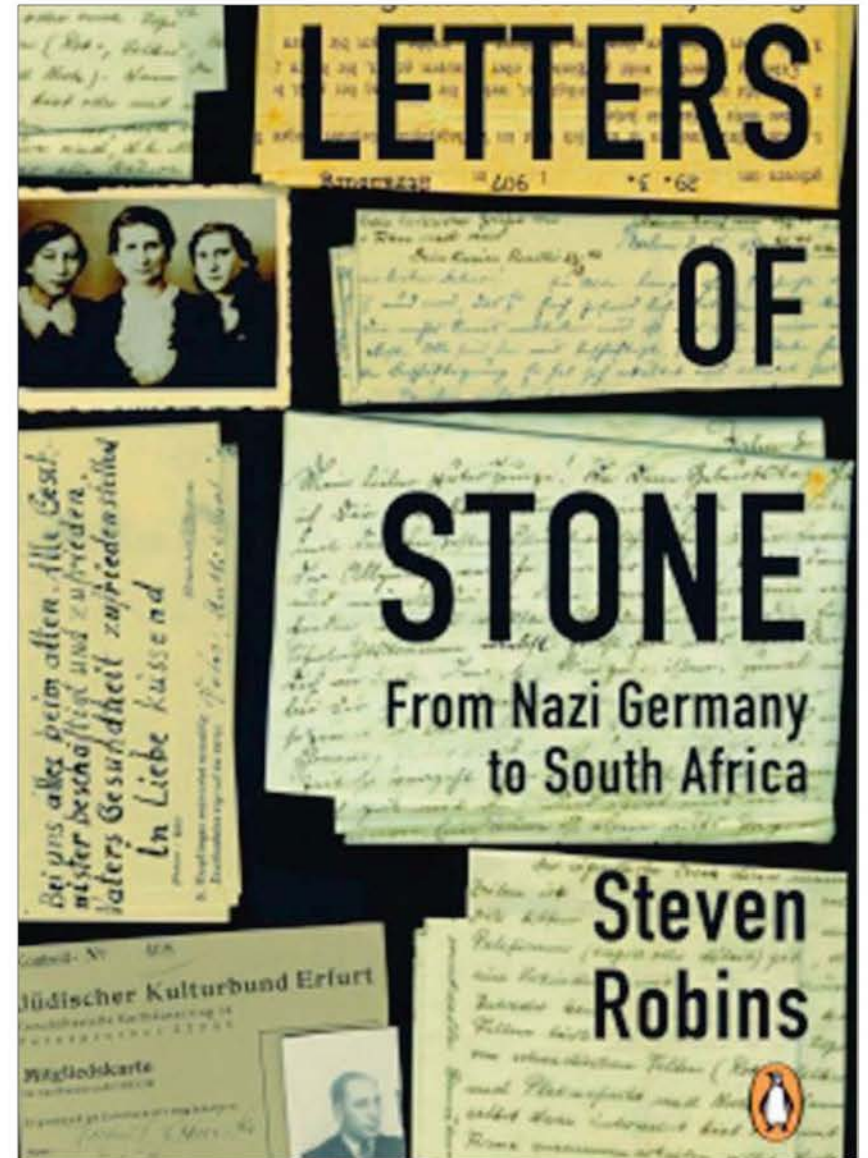
academic researcher and a writer of nuance renders *Letters of Stone* a work of immeasurable beauty.

It folds towards itself and then unfolds again in a pastiche of personal experience and feeling, photographs, letters and anecdotes, but through it all runs the muscle of 20th century history.

And it is this muscle that makes this work an absolute triumph of storytelling. Not satisfied – or perhaps even able – to see any detail as isolated, Robins creates a kind of meta-context for his family's story that encompasses eugenics, various genocides, war, apartheid, subjugation, dehumanisation, nationalism, cultural assimilation, exile and the creation of political situations that result in a desperate search for refuge across international borders.

While this might sound like a project in which ambition could outstrip coherence, Robins again manages this vast body of information with enormous elegance, creating three distinct but intertwined storylines: the story of his need to connect to his family; the story of the family left behind in Germany; and the story of the catastrophe of prejudice and subjugation. Each of these narratives follows its own arc and Robins controls the tension admirably. It builds and builds so that one becomes enthralled to the extent that it is hard to close the book for any period of time.

The story of what happens to his family – revealed in letters found after his father Herbert and his Uncle Artur's deaths – emerges through the hand of his grandmother Cecilie. The growing anxiety, the narrowing of the geographic and social spaces from which she reports and the desperation to escape from Germany, create a stifling claustrophobia that must have



deeply affected Robins during the research. There is much to admire, consider, talk about and take heed of in *Letters of Stone*. I cannot think of

a single South African for whom this book would not have relevance. Especially now. Especially here.

Especially this week.