

Journey into stupefying exercise in evil

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.

STEVEN ROBINS

IN 1996, while attending an American Anthropology Association conference in Washington DC, I took time out from sessions to visit the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. The exhibits, which featured huge piles of shoes, spectacles and suitcases from the death camps, shocked and unsettled me.

Other exhibits revealed the complexity of big business and science – physical anthropology in particular – in the genocide. In one exhibit, prominence was given to German anatomist and physical anthropologist Dr Eugen Fischer, a Nazi scientist whose footprint I would again stumble across many years later.

It was Fischer's scientific work that led directly to Nazi policy decisions regarding racial classification, and which created the conditions for the mass murder of Roma, Sinti and Jews.

Another German scientist featured in the exhibition was psychiatrist and physician Robert Ritter, who wrote a report that led the Reich Interior Ministry to issue guidelines in 1936 "On Combating the Gypsy Plague".

The same year, Ritter was appointed to head the newly created Eugenic and Population Biological Research Station of the Reich Health and Sanitation Office.

By 1941, Ritter's research and policy guidelines mandated the photographic surveillance and fingerprinting of Roma, setting in motion the processes for extermination.

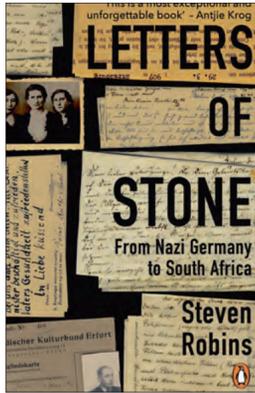
The museum also provided information about the Nazi euthanasia programme, known as Operation T4, the use of slave labour at the camps by the Bavarian Motor Works (BMW), the role of IBM in Nazi racial-classification systems. More than half the participants at the 1942 Wannsee Conference, which decided on the Final Solution, had doctoral degrees.

It was ultimately German scientists and engineers who volunteered their expertise towards the design and construction of the machinery for mass murder, while businessmen from IBM and pharmaceutical and chemicals company IG Farben were the capitalist cogs in this catastrophe.

Mieczyslaw Stobierski's model of Crematorium II at Auschwitz-Birkenau at the museum made this modern, industrial-scale mass killing machine more concrete in my imagination.

The model reconstruction of the gas chambers contained small clay figures sculpted with frightening realism, and I tried to imagine the

EXTRACT
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terror and the screams as the gas was released.

Were the victims aware of what was about to happen to them? They would have had to stand naked in front of Josef Mengele and his selection team before being sent to this terrifying death.

Adolf Eichmann, Reinhard Heydrich and countless other Nazi officers and foot soldiers set in motion a series of bureaucratic procedures – including racial classifications and ordinances that stripped Jews of citizenship, the confiscation of their property, and slave labour, deportation and selection – that culminated in the murder of my father's family.

The exhibition left me in a state of stupefaction, and I was relieved when I happened upon the museum's library and resource centre.

I needed to speak to someone about what I had just experienced, and found a museum staff member, who listened as I told him how disorienting I had found the exhibition.

When I mentioned that my father's family had perished in the Holocaust, he looked for their names in a bulky black book called the Berliner Gedenkbuch – its full title is The Memorial Book of the Federal Archives for the Victims of the Persecution of Jews in Germany (1933-1945).

Searching among the pages with surnames that began with the letter R – Reich, Rosen, Rubinstein – the museum assistant stopped at the names of the six Robinski family

members: Cecilie, David, Edith, Hildegard, Siegfried and Siegfried's wife, who was also Edith. Next to their names were their addresses in Berlin, dates and places of birth, and dates and places of deportation.

My grandparents were the first members of the Robinski family to be deported, on the 21st Transport to Riga, on October 19, 1942. Hildegard was deported to Auschwitz on February 19, 1943 and, shortly thereafter, on March 1, 1943, my uncle Siegfried was sent there on the 31st Transport. Their sister Edith was sent to Auschwitz five months later.

I felt like a detective stumbling across the first hard evidence that ties a murderer to a crime scene. What had been vague and abstract knowledge about the family's fate took on concreteness.

The discovery, to me, seemed similar to those made by members of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission when they unearthed the brutal secrets of the apartheid regime.

I remember the confusion on the museum worker's face as he witnessed the satisfaction and relief that passed over me after learning the truth about my family. Perhaps my expression should have revealed shock and sorrow.

In my mind, however, the terrifyingly mundane, officious details about the Robinski family's deportation and their final destinations gave substance to their existence. It meant the memory of my father's family had not been completely erased off the face of the earth.

The preface of the Berliner Gedenkbuch, written by the then-federal president of Germany, Horst Köhler, comes close to capturing what I was experiencing in that moment: "This Memorial Book gives those murdered their names and dignity back. It is a memorial and at the same time a reminder that every single life has a name and its own truly unique tragic story."

The knowledge the book imparted would forever change my life, but I could not have imagined at that point where it would lead me. As I left the museum I was acutely aware I carried with me information that had been buried for decades in the black hole of silence in my father's house. That silence had finally been broken.

The museum visit had opened a portal into my family's past that I might not be able to close, and I had no choice but to cautiously peer in. I decided I needed to go to Germany, to Berlin, the quintessential city of ghosts. But did the ghosts even want visitors? Would my father have approved of what I was doing, or would he have implored me to



In this February 17, 1941 picture taken in the Warsaw Ghetto, Jews wearing white armbands bearing the Star of David board a tram marked "For Jews Only".

PICTURE: AP

SO MUCH LEFT UNSAID

A YEAR after my interview with my father, I received a call from my cousin Cecilia informing me that he was very ill. I had recently arrived in Harare, and was about to embark on two years of rural fieldwork in Zimbabwe for my doctoral thesis.

I also spoke to my mother, who tried to downplay the seriousness of the situation but, having heard the urgency in Cecilia's voice, I flew to Cape Town a few days later.

My father was in good spirits despite the hopeless cancer prognosis, and had come to terms with his diagnosis. "It's enough already. It's time to go," he said to me. I spent 10 precious days with him before returning to Zimbabwe.

A few months later, at my fieldwork site in Matabeleland South province, I received news from home that my father's condition was critical. I arrived at the hospital just in time to say goodbye to him. He was heavily sedated on

morphine, but I was sure he could hear me as I spoke to him and stroked his head.

As his life ebbed away, his eyes stared into mine, and it was as if he was trying to tell me something important. A nurse who saw me caressing his head remarked: "They still have feeling, even after the pulse stops."

There was so much more I would have wanted to ask him. There was so much between us that was left unsaid.

Young Saudi royal at the heart of Middle East's great power struggle

ISHAAN THAROOR

ON SUNDAY, Saudi Arabia's Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was in Islamabad, meeting with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

The recent flaring of tensions between the Saudis and their regional foe, Iran, compelled the visit to a long-standing ally.

The Pakistani military reiterated its commitment to Riyadh, declaring in a statement "that any threat to Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity would evoke a strong response from Pakistan".

But the Saudi overtures present an uncomfortable conundrum for Islamabad.

Home to some of the world's largest Sunni and Shia populations and with a grim recent history of sectarian violence, Pakistan can ill afford to get too deeply involved in the wider power struggles of the Middle East – that is, the rivalry between Iran, a theocratic Shia state, and Saudi Arabia, which sees itself at the vanguard of Sunni Islam.

Sections of the Pakistani establishment have long benefited from Saudi largess and patronage and Islamabad is ostensibly a willing



Saudi Arabia's Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

PICTURE: REUTERS

member of Riyadh's grand military alliance of "Islamic" countries unveiled last month, which was widely seen as a bulwark against Iranian interests.

But Pakistan also shares a vast border with Iran and harbours hopes of deepening ties with Tehran. Not long after Mohammed bin Salman's departure, a key Sharif aide emphasised Pakistani support for the Saudis would not come in the form of ground troops.

"Sending our troops to any country is against our policy. Pakistan

never sends its forces for any coalition apart from the UN," said Sartaj Aziz, a senior foreign policy adviser to the prime minister.

The awkwardness of the present isn't helped by the outsized role played by the young Saudi deputy crown prince, who, at just 30, has had a conspicuous ascension since the crowning of his father, King Salman, last year.

Mohammed bin Salman not only has the defence portfolio, but has also assumed responsibility as Saudi Arabia's chief economic planner, a vital task given the perilous effect that a slide in global oil prices has had on his nation's economy. There are rumours that the current crown prince, Mohammed bin Nayef, 56, could even eventually be moved aside for Mohammed bin Salman.

Unsurprisingly, the prince's rise has caused ripples, and has antagonised some other members of the vast royal House of Saud who resent being shunted aside by the younger generation. Moreover, the prince and his father have presided over a pronounced – and, to some, worrying – shift in the kingdom's role on the world stage.

Last year, Post columnist David Ignatius pointed to "the aggressive

policy role played by Mohammed bin Salman", seen most keenly in the largely derided Saudi war effort in Yemen. The intervention was aimed at thwarting the country's Houthis rebels, a faction loosely affiliated with Iran. The conflict, though, has spiralled into a protracted battle and led to a crippling humanitarian crisis.

Earlier this month, Saudi and Iranian relations reached a new nadir after Saudi authorities went ahead with the execution of a prominent Shia cleric. Critics accused Riyadh of playing a deliberately provocative sectarian game, fuelled in part by its own domestic insecurities.

In an interview with The Economist last week, Mohammed bin Salman attempted to cut a conciliatory role. When asked if he considered Iran his country's biggest enemy, he responded: "We hope not."

There is more widespread concern, though, in the destabilising effect of Saudi Arabia's own actions. Both in the US and Europe, a frustration with the kingdom is growing.

Old assurances have given way to a new, uncertain dynamic. – Bloomberg

JASON SAMENOW

FOR those unconvinced about the reality of climate change, conditions last year should have erased any doubt. The data presented an indisputable picture of a warming world.

The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and Nasa say 2015 was the warmest year on record. The previous record, set the year before, wasn't broken, it was smashed.

With 2015, 15 of the 16 warmest years in the administration's 136-year climate record have occurred since 2000.

Last year was the 39th consecutive year, from 1977, in which global temperatures were higher than the 20th-century average.

In the past two decades, the Earth's temperature has surged to new highs six times – in 2015, 2014, 2010, 2005, 1998 and 1997. The last record cold year was 1908.

Numerous independent indicators confirm the picture.

Glaciers are losing mass at a rate "without precedent" in the 21st century, according to a survey published in September by the World Glacier Monitoring Service.

Arctic sea ice is declining dramatically. The ice's peak extent in February was the lowest on record, and the minimum extent in September ranked fourth-lowest. Depending on the season, the ice extent has declined by between 10 and 15 percent a decade since satellite measurements began in the late 1970s.

The data melts all doubt – the world is warmer

Although Antarctic sea ice extent has exhibited a counterintuitive increase in recent years, probably related to changing winds, it is not as sensitive to temperature as Arctic ice, whose losses Nasa says are occurring twice as fast as the Antarctic's gains.

Sea levels are rising. Nasa says the rate has jumped from 1mm a year 100 years ago to 3mm a year today. The more the sea levels climb, the more high tides inundate areas that used to be flooded only during big storms. This "nuisance flooding" has increased by a staggering 300 to 925 percent in US coastal areas since the 1960s.

Freshwater is warming, with lake temperatures climbing even faster than those of the air and oceans since the 1980s, according to 60 scientists who monitored 235 lakes on six continents for at least 25 years and published their findings last month.

Last year, carbon dioxide levels passed the symbolic threshold of 400 parts in a million, which is more than 40 percent higher than pre-industrial levels. Human-generated heat-trapping gases act like a steroid in the atmosphere, injecting extra heat into weather systems and increasing their potential to achieve new extremes.

Last year brought a barrage of unprecedented weather events that shocked meteorologists time after time.

After a record warm winter devoid of appreciable snow, California's April snowpack was a pathetic 5 percent of normal.

In July, a town in Iran registered levels of heat and humidity so extreme that the heat index could not be computed reliably.

In October, fuelled in part by the highest water temperatures on record, boosted by one of the strongest El Niños yet, Hurricane Patricia in the eastern Pacific packed winds peaking at 320km/h, making it the fiercest recorded in the western hemisphere.

At the end of last month, a surge of warm air fronting a monster storm near Iceland briefly pushed the temperature at the North Pole above freezing point, to 0.7°C. This weather system also led to a tornado outbreak near Dallas and record temperatures on the East Coast.

Last week brought the first January hurricane since 1938 to the Atlantic, right after the earliest hurricane on record formed in the central Pacific. – The Washington Post



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