

# Human story cast in stone

## PE childhood framed against the Holocaust

Gillian McAinsh

mcainshg@timesmedia.co.za

**T**HE memoir *Letters of Stone* is a history book with a difference by Stephen Robins, a professor in the department of sociology and social anthropology at the University of Stellenbosch.

Robins – whose own childhood in Port Elizabeth in the 1960s and 1970s is woven into the book – intertwines the story of his family of Polish-German Jews with international events over the past century, bringing the story alive.

As an academic he has meticulously researched the content (as shown by the index and bibliography) yet it does not read like a lecture. Rather, it is a loving family tribute where individual personalities shine through.

The homely details included in family letters between Germany and South Africa are all the more tragic as Robins frames them against the horror of the Holocaust where his grandparents, uncle and two aunts died.

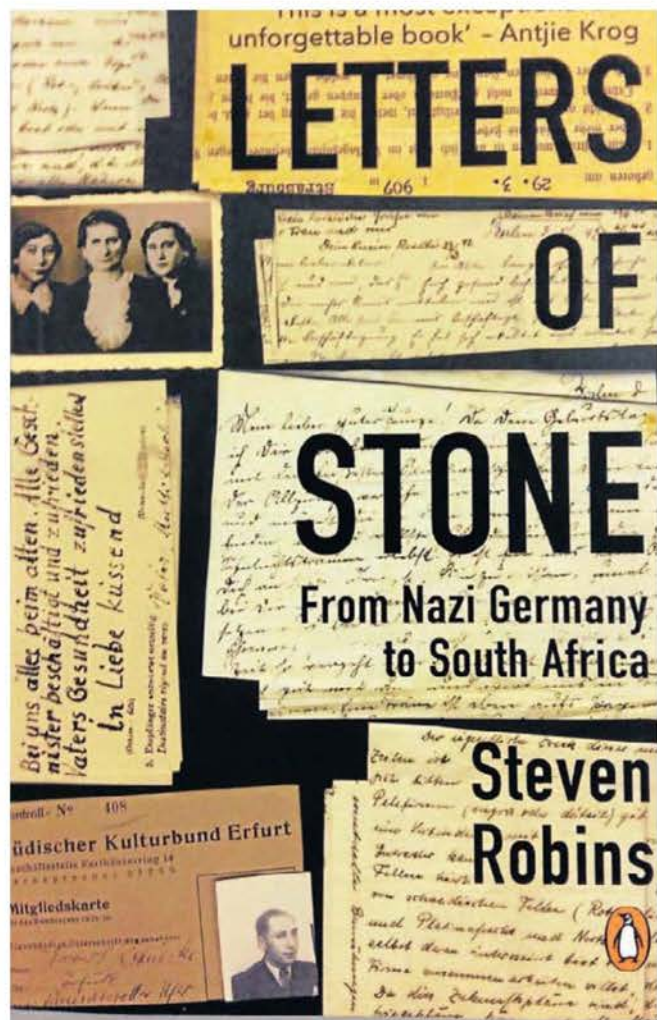
His own father, Herbert Robinski, who had fled Nazi Germany before it was too late, apparently never spoke about their fate and by the time Robins reached a stage in his life where he wanted to know more, it was almost too late.

*Letters of Stone* shines a light on the “black hole of silence” that happened not only to those who died in Riga and Auschwitz but also others on the family tree and it’s a fascinating portrait.

Port Elizabeth readers may particularly enjoy the author’s early recollections of his childhood in Mill Park, playing soccer, attending Theodor Herzl and then Grey and living in a “thoroughly anglicised secular Jewish home”.

There are touches of humour, as in the family folklore that their surname was changed because “a Robinski was skiing in the Swiss Alps one day and lost his skis”. Then there are terrifying glimpses into the damage racism and eugenics do: after witnessing Nazi brutality Robins’ father lives in “visceral fear of officialdom” for the rest of his life, sensitising his son to the parallels between anti-Semitism and apartheid.

And the title? Among Germany’s many war memorials, there are tens of thousands of paving stones with small brass plaques, engraved with



the names of Holocaust victims and their deportation dates. They are called *Stolpersteine* (stumbling stones) and without knowing the fate of many of the six million killed, they act as tiny gravestones. The book ends with an image of the *Stolpersteine* for David, Cecilie, Edith and Hildgarth Robinski.

Robins 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.

In *Letters of Stone* he gives a new generation a personal yet authoritative memoir, which I found an immensely worthwhile read.

● *Letters of Stone* is published by Penguin and retails for around R250.