

Echoes of horror

Heartbreaking communications from the past evoke terrible helplessness of a man unable to save his family from the Nazis

Letters of Stone – From Nazi Germany to South Africa

By **Steven Robins**

Penguin Random House

This is a book Steven Robins was born to write, in honour and remembrance of family he never knew.

Letters of Stone is a deeply moving, personalised account of a family's suffering as the storm clouds built in Europe from the late 1930s. It is the story of a German Jew, the author's father Herbert Robinski, who managed to immigrate – in reality, to flee – to SA in 1936. But, tragically, he could not get his parents and sisters out in time, and the book's core comprises a translation of selected letters from the author's grandparents, trapped in Berlin, to their son.

Like most of his generation of survivors, refugees or those who suffered in myriad ways, Robins' father said virtually nothing of his earlier life, or of what happened in the war. But, after his father's death, Robins comes across the secreted letters, and they open a window of dreadful discovery.

The correspondence spans 1936 to 1941, with heartrending fragmentary communication in the form of Red Cross telegrams for a while thereafter, until – we know this is coming – the author leads us inexorably to

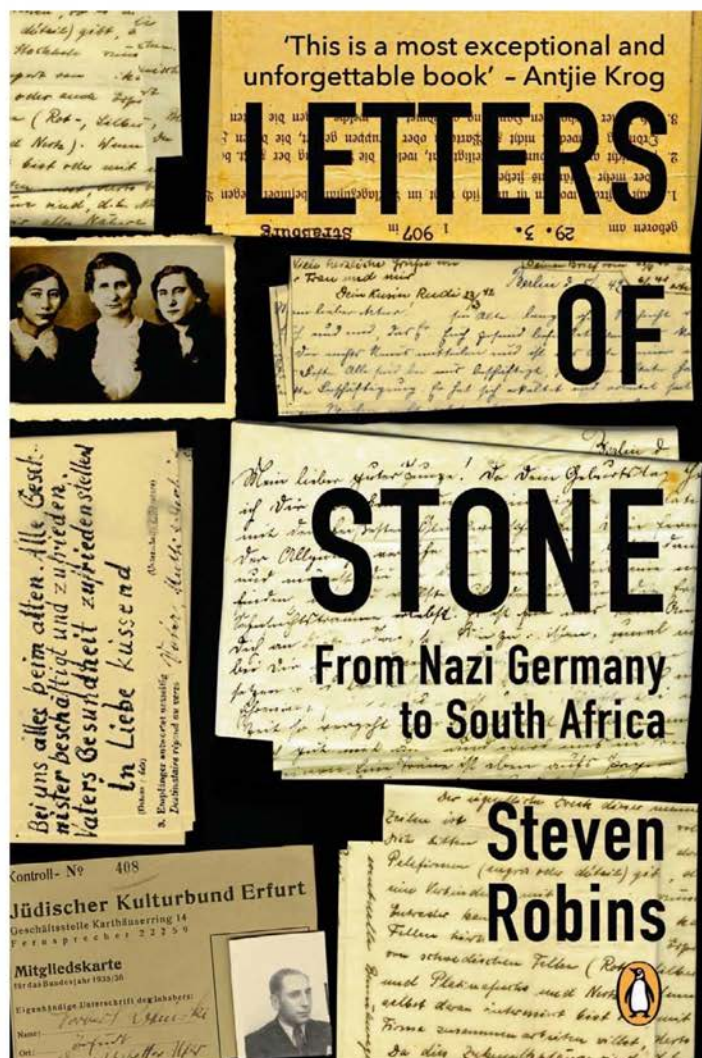
Riga and Auschwitz, where his grandparents and other relatives perished.

The initial dispatches are largely mundane; in conveying the triviality of daily routine and the minutiae of peripheral chat, we discern the portents of doom in the subtexts. The written words mask the unsaid, the unthinkable, which amplifies the pathos of everyday lives caught within a vortex of impending horror.

As the months ticked by, all efforts to leave Germany were thwarted by harsher and harsher laws and stultifying bureaucracy: giant and tiny cogs in a dastardly machine. In the US and much of Europe, the context of the Great Depression decade (1929–1939) had engendered staunch resistance to immigration, while in SA the Aliens Act of 1937 effectively closed the door on Jewish immigration.

Kristallnacht, a night of nihilism in November 1938, saw Jews openly murdered in the streets, tens of thousands imprisoned for subsequent deportation to the first concentration camps, and synagogues and businesses set ablaze. It marked a watershed, and the poignancy deepens as the tone of the correspondence becomes more direct, pleadingly urgent, reflecting anguished hope as well as a fearful resignation.

Clearly, after Kristallnacht Herbert Robinski's parents held him as their solitary lifeline, and Robins plausibly concludes that the burden of guilt – shame,



even – in being unable to secure his family's survival would have tormented his father for the rest of his life. There is a gentle filial understanding as Robins describes a man who, realising the sheer impossibility of trying to make some sense of what happened to his parents and siblings, forged a new life – but with an existential inertia, a quiet desperation bounded, always, by the shroud of silence.

Robins is resolute in bringing

this fraught silence back to life, to forge some form of permanent memory and record of his lost forebears. The letters are a starting point, and eventually he manages to trace photographs. In the Berlin street where his grandparents lived, he embeds an ambient physical representation in the form of “stumbling stones” – literally, mini-monuments, engraved with their names, which are intended to jar, to push the memory for-

ward. Forgetting is not allowed, and the stones are a symbol of defiance and undying legacy.

Letters of Stone, too, is ostensibly a son setting down a testimony to his relatives. But the book's simple premise is a subterfuge. It transforms into an insight into Jewish identity in the pre- and post-Holocaust diaspora in SA, an exploratory essay on themes of the human condition, and an inquiry into the nature of evil not only as manifested in the Holocaust, but also in the context of other genocides in recent history.

Certain chapters are repetitive, as if Robins feels he has to reiterate the connection between the racist ideology of 1930s German National Socialism – via the lunatic science of early-1900s eugenics which formed the basis of the Nazis'

Aryan master race premise – and the underpinnings of colonialism and apartheid. In these sections the book shouts too loudly, proselytising rather than permitting the reader to draw allegorical links to abhorrent oppression in all its forms.

Perhaps more to the point, the chronology is broken, which interrupts the letters' sense of turbulence and danger, and deflects the writing's emotional resonance.

Letters of Stone does not provide graphic detail, nor does it encompass a vaguely comprehensive historical narrative of what Jewish scholar and historian Lucy Dawidowicz calls “the daemon let loose in society, Cain in corporate embodiment”. Nonetheless, in its academic ambits the book's complexity attempts too much, and it loses

cohesion. Rather, the searing passages occur when Robins refocuses upon his grandparents' missives, some of which are eye-welling as we feel the simplicity of the words weighed down with the anguish of the defining moral catastrophe of the 20th century.

Ultimately, bleakness pervades. The letters dictate a time, if not for silence, then for solemn reflection; they crystallise the impossibility of finding answers or understanding in any of the backdrop or specifics of the Holocaust.

The words have bequeathed Robins an evocative knowledge, an ensuing generation's sad wisdom, but they have not offered him any solace, and probably never will. If this seems to damn the book with faint praise, it is instead a tribute to the author

for engaging complex issues with courage and dignity.

I am old enough to remember my wizened late grandmother, a 1937 émigré from Poland, and her whispered mention of lost relatives or friends. But I was too young to pay attention, and even if I had I would not have understood or absorbed the meaning of the words. In his publication and analysis of the letters, Robins has helped me to understand, at least partially.

Robins has made the shimmer of his own family memory more tangible, but he has also written a timely reminder of the dangers of unfettered power, fanaticism, virulent prejudice and racism, and proffered a warning as to what happens when infamy takes hold.

David Gorin