

'Letters' exceptional and unforgettable

Letters of Stone

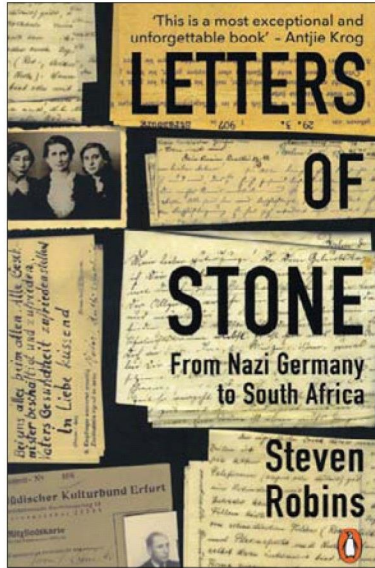
by Steven Robins

(Penguin/Random House, R250)

ANTJIE Krog described *Letters of Stone* as an exceptional and unforgettable book, a judgement with which I fully concur.

The author, Steven Robins, grew up in Port Elizabeth, secure in the protective coloration of an anglicised and secularised middle-class home. In the dining room there was a haunting photograph of three women, who were clearly relatives of his father, but shrouded in silence, they were not sufficiently evocative to disturb his childhood equanimity. The discovery of their identity as his grandmother Cecile and his aunts Edith and Hildegard was the start of an intricate journey of discovery and engagement with his Jewish identity.

The author's father, Herbert Robinski, as well as his uncle Artur, had managed to escape from Nazi Germany and the profound silence about the remaining family in Germany resulted from the searing sense of guilt that they could do nothing to help their loved ones



get out of Germany before they were done to death in Auschwitz and Riga.

Close on 100 letters, mostly from Cecile, discovered purely by chance, provide a terrifying account of how their fate closed in on them.

"Otherwise everything is as usual" a letter from 1938 records,



demonstrating the stealth with which events may move to habituate human beings to the shockingly abnormal.

Robins gives a voice to these voiceless victims of the Holocaust, but he also explores the disturbing ideological links between South Africa and Nazi Germany.

The German anthropologist Eugen Fischer, who subjected Rehoboth Bastards to the scientific measurements that demonstrated their innate inferiority, became a leading Nazi racial scientist.

The eugenics pioneered by Fischer left their mark on the physical anthropology taught at South African universities and were one strain in apartheid

ideology. In Germany it was made to justify the killing of Jews; in South Africa it created a hierarchy of human worth and justified mobilisation against Jews, who were branded as "unassimilable".

The passing of the Aliens Act by the Herzog government in 1937 effectively shut the door to Jewish immigration in Herbert's face.

The author has a highly emotional story to tell, but there is an absence of histrionics in the telling. Instead, the emotional impact is heightened by the scientific detachment with which Robins, a social anthropologist by profession, interrogates his material. It is this detachment that enables him to universalise his family history, relating it to the hundreds of thousands of refugees who are, at this moment, trying to "find refuge in an increasingly hostile fortress Europe" and having to cope with the trauma of loved ones left behind.

This is indeed an exceptional and unforgettable book and is most highly recommended for a profound reading experience. – John Boje