

Letters of Stone. From Nazi Germany to South Africa.

Steven Robins.

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In this moving book the author takes the reader on a captivating but painful journey of discovery through the history of his own family. Steven Robins, a social anthropologist at Stellenbosch University, describes his childhood in a Jewish South African home within the familiar coordinates of a comfortable white middle class existence in the 1960s and 1970s. At an age when he became progressively aware of the gross injustices of apartheid he began to ask questions about his father's upbringing in post-World War I Germany. Initially, the curiosity of the author was incited by an old photograph of three sombre-looking women in the family dining room that was never explained or spoken about. Herbert Robins was a refugee from Nazi Germany who had washed up on the shores of South Africa in 1936. He steadfastly refused to talk about his previous life and refrained from speaking about the fate of his parents, siblings and other family members that he had to leave behind in Germany. The chance discovery of a stack of letters in the Cape Town flat of relatives after the death of his father became a turning point for the author. With the help of friends and colleagues Robins began the difficult task of deciphering and translating these letters from German into English.

Alluding to the project of a German artist, who has embedded "stumbling stones" that are inscribed with the names of Holocaust victims into the pavement of many German towns and cities, Robins grasped the opportunity of using these "letters of stone" to uncover and preserve the memory of his German relatives. Much of the book consists of extensive citations from these eyewitness accounts of the ever-increasing discrimination and persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany. The women in the photograph—the book contains a considerable number of family pictures—turned out to be the author's grandmother and aunts who perished in Auschwitz.

It is well known that Holocaust survivors, or those who were lucky enough to escape before they were sucked into the Nazi extermination industry, often suppressed their trauma in silence. As the author is able to attest, even the descendants of the survivors have to battle with the repercussions of blocked memories, especially when children become exposed to symptoms of psychological trauma and erratic behaviour of their parents. The author openly describes his own feelings of dread and helplessness that frequently overcame him at various stages of the exploration of his family history. The letters provide ample evidence of the humiliating circumstances that the Nazi bureaucracy created for Jews in Germany, whose impact was designed to destroy the spirit of people who were gradually pushed into the abyss of the Holocaust. The writers of these letters had, of course,

every reason to express their anguish in ways that would not provoke the wrath of the censors. Superficially cheerful assurances of being able to cope must be read as transparent attempts to comfort Herbert in South Africa, who can only have agonised over the fate of his loved ones. The letters often revolve around the frantic attempts made to leave Germany. Unsurprisingly, they increasingly resounded with despair in the face of the unwillingness of foreign countries, such as South Africa from the late 1930s, to throw out a life line to Jews. Herbert had been lucky to enter his new country before the immigration laws were tightened.

As Robins points out, it is impossible to read these letters without a sense of foreboding. The guarded references to the increasing economic hardship and social ostracisation experienced by Jews merely hint at the gruesome reality in Nazi Germany. With the hindsight granted to present-day readers, we know the fate that awaited these men and women as an elongated and agonising social death reached its culmination in systematic mass murder.

In describing his journeys to Germany, Poland, Israel and the United States of America in the course of his research, Robins is not merely concerned with uncovering the hidden history of his father's family. Interwoven with the story of his search for more information are chapters that discuss relevant trends in the history of scientific racism, trying to show connections between colonialism and later developments in Nazi Germany. A prominent figure in this narrative is Eugen

Fischer, the author of an anthropological study of the Rehoboth Basters in German South West Africa, who became a leading academic under the Nazis. Robins is also inspired by Hannah Arendt's quest for the links between colonialism and European authoritarianism that she discussed in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). This attests to the intellectual integrity of the author as he makes an effort in discussing the sinister aspects of the involvement of his own discipline in endorsing racist stereotypes that were meant to justify white supremacy. As the general style of the book seems to indicate, however, these sections provide relevant background information more for the benefit of the non-specialist than of scholarly readers. It is an ambitious undertaking to address the complexity of the debates about the ideological and intellectual connections between German National Socialism and South African racism and apartheid within the scope of a biographical study. It should also be noted that some inaccuracies seem to have slipped through the proofreading process. The South African maverick politician, Oswald Pirow, was not the founder of the right-wing *Ossewa Brandwag* as claimed by the author (102), and the famous German writer Heinrich Mann, the brother of the even more famous Thomas Mann, was not Jewish as a fleeting remark appears to indicate (182).

These critical comments are not meant, however, to distract from the author's achievement. This book succeeds in salvaging previously hidden historical memory from the catastrophe of the

mass murder of the Jews in Europe. As emphasised by Robins, the book also may make readers pause to think about the awful circumstances currently faced by hundreds of thousands of refugees hoping to reach safe havens in the West and elsewhere despite rising xenophobia and prejudice in host countries.

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