

Review “Letters of Stone. From Nazi Germany to South Africa” (Steven Robins, 2016)

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When [Steven Robins](#) delivered his inaugural lecture as a Professor of Social Anthropology at Stellenbosch University near Cape Town a few years ago, he related his motivation for a career in anthropology to his biography and family background. Now Robins, well-known to medical anthropologists for his acclaimed research on South Africa’s [Treatment Action Campaign](#), HIV/AIDS and citizenship, has published a book, which charts his journey of discovery about the lives and fates of his father’s family in southern Africa, Berlin, Riga and Auschwitz. He intertwines this biographical narrative with the wider context of early and mid-twentieth century South Africa on the one hand, and, on the other, the harrowing history of international, and especially German, physical anthropology, eugenics and race science.

Steven Robins was raised in the 1960s and 1970s in the industrial seaport town of Port Elizabeth in what he describes as a “thoroughly anglicised secular Jewish home” (Robins 2016, p. 5). Their surname, Robins, was English, although his father’s family in Germany had retained the name Robinski. In the family’s dining room stood a black-and-white photograph of three unknown women in old-fashioned formal clothing. Only later did Steven learn that they were his grandmother and aunts, and that they were murdered in the Holocaust. His father, who had managed to escape to South Africa from Nazi Germany in 1937, never spoke of the fate of his family who had remained trapped in Berlin when South Africa and many other countries closed their doors to Jewish refugees.

With this photograph opens the poignant story of how Steven gradually discovered his family’s fate. Telling his journey from the meagre official facts he initially stumbled upon in museums in Washington and Berlin, the story unfolds powerfully after he later discovered a set of letters sent from the family in Berlin to his father and only surviving brother in southern Africa. Through these letters the mute women in the dining-room photograph could now tell their own story.

Steven Robins does not only convey his own and his family’s harrowing history. He powerfully connects it with the rise of racial science and eugenics worldwide, and especially in Germany, which justified the racist murder of the European Jews, Sinti and Roma. Robins explores the southern African origins of the ‘scientific’ study of heredity in human evolution, conducted in 1908 by the physical anthropologist Eugen Fischer. Fischer’s study focused on the effects of racial mixing (‘miscegenation’), for which he examined the Bastards of Rehoboth in the then German colony of South West Africa, partly fuelled by the rediscovery of Mendelian genetics in 1900. From 1927 Fischer was the first director of the ‘[Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics](#)’ (KWI-A), housed in Berlin-Dahlem. The KWI-A exemplifies the lethal execution of medical sciences in the interest of Nazi racist ideology and policy. Robins demonstrates that scientists like Fischer, driven by unbridled ambition, became instrumental for

the persecution of all those the Nazis considered undesirables. The KWI-A's complicity in the holocaust became even more pronounced under Otmar von Verschuer, who succeeded Fischer as Director from 1942. Robins points out the striking similarities in the ways Fischer and colonial officials classified Rehoboth Basters at the beginning of the 20th century, and the Nazis' classification of the European Jews. His pronouncement that "through Fischer's work, a barbaric and lethal science incubated in the colonial laboratories of southern Africa had boomeranged back into the heartland of 'civilised Europe'" (p. 131), is powerfully reminiscent of the writings of Hannah Arendt and Aimé Césaire, who have pointed out the colonial origins of the dehumanisation and objectification of racially and eugenically undesirables by the Nazis.

This is a significant book, deeply moving, a multi-layered presentation of autobiography, photography, the family letters, which brings back the voices of some who perished in the Holocaust and breaks the silence of survivors like Steven's father.

It is also a layered excavation of the inextricable connections between Germany, Namibia and South Africa. In the end, Robins traces the roots of racial science back to South Africa and Stellenbosch University where he teaches and demonstrates the intersected challenges in today's world, reminding his readers of 21st century people fleeing from theatres of war and violence and their tormenting attempts to find refuge. It is of special interest for Germany where decolonisation and human remains are still contested (Kössler 2015).

'Letters of Stone' pulls together various threads to create an unforgettable, highly accessible reading. The book's title speaks to the weight carried by the survivors, who were driven into silence, as well as their descendants. It also references the '[stumble stones](#)', the small brass plaques, which the Steven Robins planted in Berlin in memory of his relatives.

About the author

Heike Becker is Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of the Western Cape.

References

Kössler, Reinhart. 2015. *Namibia and Germany: Negotiating the Past*. Windhoek: UNAM Press and Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot Verlag.

Robins, Steven. 2016. [Letters of Stone. From Nazi Germany to South Africa. Cape Town: Penguin Books.](#)