



Letters of Stone

Steven Robins

Penguin Random House South Africa

Jan 2016

'This is a most exceptional and unforgettable book' – Antjie Krog

'I would probably call it an experimental ethnography/social history/family memoir' – Steven Robins

As a young boy growing up in Port Elizabeth in the 1960s and 1970s, Steven Robins was haunted by an old photograph of three unknown women on a table in the dining room. Only later did he learn that the women were his father's mother and sisters, photographed in Berlin in 1937, before they were killed in the Holocaust. Steven's father, who had fled Nazi Germany before it was too late, never spoke about the fate of his family who remained there.

Steven became obsessed with finding out what happened to the women, but had little to go on. In time he stumbled on official facts in museums in Washington DC and Berlin, and later he discovered almost one hundred letters sent to his father and uncle from the family in Berlin during the Nazi terror. The women in the photograph could now tell their story. Letters of Stone tracks Steven's journey of discovery about the lives and fates of the Robinski family, in southern Africa, Berlin, Riga and Auschwitz. It also explores the worldwide rise of eugenics and racial science before the war, which justified the murder of Jews by the Nazis and caused South Africa and other countries to close their doors to Jewish refugees.

Most of all, this book is a poignant reconstruction of a family trapped in an increasingly terrifying and deadly Nazi state, and of the immense pressure on Steven's father in faraway South Africa, which forced him to retreat into silence.