



Letters of Stone: From Nazi Germany to South Africa

Steven Robins

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As a young boy growing up in Port Elizabeth in the 1960s and 1970s, Steven Robins was haunted by an old postcard-size 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 over a hundred letters sent to his father and uncle from the family in Berlin between 1936 and 1943. The women who before had been unnamed faces in a photograph could now tell their story to future generations.

Letters of Stone tracks Steven's journey of discovery about the lives and fates of the Robinski family. It is also a book about geographical journeys: to the Karoo town of Williston, where his father's uncle settled in the late nineteenth century and became mayor; to Berlin, where Steven laid 'stumbling stones' (Stolpersteine) in commemoration of his relatives; to Auschwitz, where his father's siblings perished. 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.



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