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**Steven Robins, Letters of Stone: From Nazi Germany to South Africa. Cape Town: Penguin Books, 2016.
314 pp.**

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Today Europe is wondering how to stop the tide of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and few are contemplating to emigrate to Africa. But in the 1930s leaving for Africa was a dream for hundreds of thousands Europeans. These included Jews who wanted to escape from a Germany that from 1933 to 1945 was in the grip of Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP). One family trying to escape were the Robinski who had moved to Berlin from East Prussia, turned over to Poland in the wake of World War One. The author of this intriguing book is Steven Robins, professor of anthropology at Stellenbosch University, whose father managed to escape to South Africa in 1936 after having been briefly imprisoned in Germany. This would be a fairly common narrative if Steven, whom I first met at the University of Cape Town during the 1980s just before his departure for PhD studies at Columbia University in New York, had not turned it into a truly detective story. Steven had no idea about his complicated origins. What he knew was that he had an uncle living in Northern Rhodesia/Zambia who eventually moved to Cape Town. His father never told Steven nor his older brother Michael who the ladies were on the photograph that accompanied the Robins during family meals resting on a commode in their Port Elizabeth living room.

Out of an anthropologist's curiosity Steven recorded some of his father's recollections in 1989 not long before he passed away. Then, as if seized by an investigative fever, Steven slowly and painstakingly found out that his grandmother and two aunts on the picture had disappeared in the Nazi hecatombs. He went to search in Berlin and Washington archives and found documents relating to the transports into which his closest relatives had been put during the early 1940s from which they never returned. He found out that a Robinski, a distant relative, moved to a Karoo desert town already in the late 1800s and even became a mayor of Willesden. That brought Steven to the exodus of Basters from the Karoo to the town of Rehoboth in German South West Africa (since 1990 Namibia). The Basters, offspring of German or Boer men who had fathered children by the native women, and who allied themselves with Germans against the Nama and Herero during the first genocide of the twentieth century,

were subsequently submitted to an anthropological (physical and sociocultural-ethnological) research by the notorious Dr. Eugen Fischer who became a well-respected academic in Nazi Germany, first through his monograph on Bastards,¹ then by his participation in the world eugenics movement and finally by giving Hitler's regime fodder for its racial and racist theories. For Steven the circle closed here as Fischer's African data were effectively used against his family who perhaps paradoxically but the more doggedly tried to escape Germany for South Africa, the Rhodesias, and quite a few other places in the Americas, Britain, Asia, even Soviet Russia. Only one brother managed to follow Steven's father in 1938 but instead of South Africa reached Ndola in then Northern Rhodesia. In spite of all their efforts, the parents of the two brothers and another brother and two sisters never made it to Africa.

Robins, who discovered his Jewishness through his frantic search for his ancestors, found out not only that South Africa before World War II had been anti-Semitic in many ways but also that laws had been placed in the way of the immigration of Jews from Nazi Germany. Some scholars such as Verwoerd and Eiselen were instrumental in preventing Jews from coming to South Africa. Strong anti-Semitism was common in pre-war South Africa. Only after the war was anti-Semitism grudgingly removed from the statutes and practices of South Africa. That is why Steven, born in 1959, had not felt anti-Jewish racism personally and therefore never had stressed the fact that he was a Jew when growing up in Port Elizabeth and later in Cape Town during his undergraduate studies. But now he was gradually discovering the virtually futile efforts of his father and uncle to bring the rest of the family to Africa.

Halfway into writing the book came a crucial discovery. When his uncle's wife died in 2014, a large number of letters sent to the two brothers in Africa by their mother, Steven's grandmother, were found. Steven Robins became a truly family historian. He masterfully exposed the drama contained in those letters, especially the search for finding ways out of Germany to Africa by his aunt Edith and her brother Siegfried. Siegfried had no suitable professional qualification but

1 Fischer, E. 1913. *Die Rehobother Bastards und das Bastardisierungsproblem beim Menschen. Anthropologische und ethnologische Studien am Rehobother Bastardvolk in Deutsch-Südwestafrika*. Jena. (2nd edition Graz 1961).

Edith was an educator and could certainly have contributed to South Africa. It is most captivating to read letters full of details about life in pre-war and early war Berlin, hidden hints about the tightening grip of the Nazi regime on the Jews, reports about those in their circle who managed to escape and those who did not. The author's effort was rendered difficult because through the change from Robinski to Robins the family language had also been lost. Steven Robins embarked upon his daring search without understanding German. His research trips to Germany and Poland were possible only through interpreters of various kinds. Luckily, for the translation of the letters he found an emphatic German speaker from Namibia who not only knew the language but could also read the German gothic script in which almost all letters were handwritten.

Of course, one could wonder why Robins, as an anthropologist, delved into a gigantic task without first learning the mother tongue of his father, grandparents, aunts and uncles. Perhaps his insights into the anthropology of the German Jewish migration effort out of Germany would have been deeper. Nevertheless, the book manages to open a mass of questions. Nowadays, Europeans are battling with the dilemma of the imperative of helping the African and Middle Eastern migrants and at the same time stopping them from coming to Europe. But the Jewish *va banque* of escape or oblivion has been a clear precedent for decades. The red tape of racism combined with bureaucracy when trying to cope and oblige with the administrative prerequisites of emigration proved insurmountable for hundreds of thousands and were thus fatal during the 1930s and 1940s. This is not completely unlike the situation of today. One wonders how so many defeated Nazis managed to escape to South America or South West Africa in 1945–6 while Jews a few years earlier experienced so many obstacles.

Many questions arise from the interdisciplinary kind of research Robins undertook. That is of course a good thing because in anthropology – unlike in Nazi Germany – there are no final solutions. Still one wonders why we repeat the same blunders and not learn from history. For Steven Robins this book has been an existential journey but by publishing it together with his thoughts about the implications of anthropology in the ideologies and policies of criminal states, he aims the mirror at all of us who are now repeating complacency and