Letters of Stone

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

University of Cape Town

Letters of Stone

Steven Robins

RBNSTE005

A dissertation submitted in *partial fulfillment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of Masters in Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2015

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Signed by candidate Date: 20 January 2015

ABSTRACT

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 the mantelpiece. 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. Having changed his name from Robinski to Robins, Steven's father communicated nothing about his European past, and he said nothing about his flight from Nazi Germany or the fate of his family who remained there, until Steven, now a young anthropologist, interviewed him in the year before he died.

Steven became obsessed with finding out what happened to the women in the photograph, but the information from his father was scant. The first breakthrough came when he discovered facts about their fates in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC and the Landesarchiv in Berlin, and the second when he discovered over a hundred letters sent to his father and uncle from the family in Berlin from 1936 to 1943. Steven was finally able to read the words of the women who before had been unnamed faces in a photograph.

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 family who were victims of the Holocaust; to Auschwitz, where his father's siblings perished. It also explores the complicity of Steven's discipline of anthropology through the story of Eugen Fischer, who studied the "Basters" who moved from the Karoo to Rehoboth in German South West Africa, providing the foundation for Nazi racial science; through the ways in which a mixture of nationalism and eugenics resulted in Jews being refused entry to South Africa and other countries in the 1930s; and via disturbing discoveries concerning the discipline of Volkekunde (Ethnology) at Steven's own university Stellenbosch. Most of all, this book is a poignant reconstruction of a family trapped in an increasingly terrifying and deadly Nazi state, and about the immense pressure on Steven's father in faraway South Africa, which forced him to retreat into silence.

Acknowledgements

There are many people who assisted me in the research and writing of this manuscript. Ute Ben Josef translated family letters from German to English, but she did much more than this. She was also my guide as I stepped into the unsettling spectral world of shadows and silences. Robert Plummer, as my MA supervisor, went well beyond the call of duty and provided unstinting support and editorial expertise throughout the writing process. Although I take full responsibility for what I have written, the manuscript vastly improved under his attentive watch. Professor Etienne van Heerden was a wonderful teacher during the year of workshops I did as part of the Creative Writing programme at UCT. I am also indebted to him for directing me to his former student, Robert Plummer. Professor Imraan Coovadia also needs to be acknowledged for encouraging me to sign up for this writing programme. Likewise, Margie Orford inspired me to tell Edith's story at time when this writing project still was very much in its infancy. Antjie Krog provided incisive comments and helpful suggestions on an earlier draft. Other friends and colleagues who have supported me in a multitude of ways include Martin Duspohl, Dr Heidi Grunebaum, Professor Aubrey Herbst, Nadia Kamies, Mark Kaplan, Gabriella Kaplan, Captain John McNab, Professor Richard Rottenburg, Isabell Schneider, Stephen Symons, Elsa van Schalkwyk, Professor Kees van der Waal, Handri Walters and, finally, my fellow students in the Creative Writing MA programme of 2012. Relatives who have assisted me throughout the research and the writing process include Harold Levy, Collette Thorne (nee Robinski), Jos Thorne, Jeffrey Racki, Michael Robins, Deborah Robins, David Robins, Kathy Robins and Cecilia Robins. I am most indebted to my life partner and comrade-in-arms Lauren Muller. Lauren and my two sons, Joshua and Daniel, had to patiently, and sometimes not so patiently, wait for my attention as I pounded away on my keyboard. Finally, I owe much gratitude to my father and his brother Artur who, despite all they went through, were real menschen with big hearts and wonderful wit and charm.

ONE

Edith's Eyes

During my childhood and youth in Port Elizabeth in the 1960s and 1970s, I was aware of the black and white postcard-size photographic portrait of three women on the wooden table in our dining room. Until I was well into adulthood I had no idea of the names of the three women. All I knew was that they were my father's family and they lived and died in Germany during the war. I must have known that they perished during the war but this knowledge was vague. Their lives, dreams, desires, fears and fates were entirely opaque to me. Yet, this portrait was to follow me around for many years. The sad expressions of the three women seem to have always been there, hovering in the shadows, waiting for me to notice them, and respond. The eyes and the facial expression of the woman on the left, who I now know is my father's younger sister Edith, have a particularly haunting hold over me.

All three women in the photograph appear sombre and despairing. They wear dated styles of dress and their shirts have translucent white lace collars. The two younger women have collars that are in the shape of bows. In the centre of the photograph the older woman wears what looks like a white lace ruff consisting of a frill of several folds of linen, muslin, silk or cotton around her neck and chest. I notice that the eyes of the younger woman on the right are squint. The older woman stares straight ahead. She seems tired and forlorn. The younger woman on the left looks equally sad, defeated and abandoned.

When I was well into adulthood, I discovered that the photograph was taken in Berlin on 20 December 1937. My father's mother probably sent it to him after he arrived in Cape Town in 1936, or perhaps his brother Artur[1] brought it when he came to South Africa

[1] As a child, I referred to my uncle as Arthur, his family in Berlin called him Artur, his Ladino-speaking Sephardic wife from Alexandria, Egypt, called him Arturo and in this manuscript I have decided to opt for Artur.

in 1938. It was as if the photograph was meant to have been hidden from view but someone had mistakenly left it on the black wooden table in our dining room. My older brother Michael cannot even remember ever having seen it as a child. But I noticed it. I never really understood what these three women were doing in our dining room, or why they looked so sad and despairing. I must have known that they perished in the Holocaust but nobody spoke a word about them, and neither did my brother and I ask about their lives and deaths. Either we were not interested, or perhaps we realised that their past was meant to be kept shrouded in secrecy. Yet, every day the three women would stare at us as we sat down to eat at the dinner table. I grew up with this silence in my father's house.

I learnt who these women were in 1989, when I interviewed my father on tape about his life. My father's family had lived in Poland until the end of the First World War, when my grandfather, David Robinski, decided to move to Berlin. My father's two brothers, Siegfried and Artur, had been born in a small town in Poland in 1905 and 1909, and his sisters Edith and Hildegard were born there during the war years. The last born, Erika, had died in her infancy because of starvation during the war. Although both his parents, and all his siblings except for Artur, had perished during the Holocaust, he did not mention a single word about their fate in our one-and-a-half-hour interview.

I find it difficult to look at the photograph these days without projecting onto it what I now know about what happened to my paternal grandmother Cecilie, and her two daughters, Edith and Hildegard. Whenever I look into Edith's sad eyes I detect a profound sense of foreshadowing. She seems to have been the one who knew what was coming. Her mother comes across as strong and stoic, even though her eyes betray signs of fatigue, vulnerability and despair. Hildegard is more difficult to fathom. But until quite recently, their lives and inner worlds were entirely impenetrable to me. Now I have a portal into their worlds. But there is still a vast, insurmountable chasm between us.

I first became conscious of being haunted by Edith's spectral presence shortly after my father's death in 1990. It was then that I began searching for archival traces and information that could tell me more about a world that no longer existed. Edith's photograph was then all I had to give material substance to this lost world. It was, as Roland Barthes once put it, the umbilical cord made of light; it provided a glimmer of hope of salvaging and resuscitating a world that had been shattered and severed. I looked to this photograph to do the impossible, to mend broken family bonds and bridge the separation between Aunt Edith, my late father and myself. So much was asked of this single, postcard-size, family portrait.

Following my interview with my father in 1989, I began to learn more about what lay beyond the small, fragile frame of Edith's photograph. He told me many stories about growing up in small towns in Poland in the years leading up to the First World War. He also told me how his father and the family left for Berlin after the war. He spoke about what it was like as a young man working as a buyer at a big departmental store in Berlin and Erfurt in the early 1930s. He even spoke at length about his arrest by the Gestapo in 1933, and how this had irrevocably changed his life. Upon his release from prison a few weeks later, he cautiously began to plan his escape to South Africa. In 1936, soon after his arrival in South Africa, he became a door-to-door women's underwear salesman. By the time I was born in Port Elizabeth in 1959, he was already a reasonably successful clothing retailer.

Left to right, Michael, SR, Herbert and Ruth outside of their clothing shop in PE

But the interview transcript had one gaping hole. Even though I had asked my father questions about virtually every aspect of his life in Poland and Germany, none of my questions had addressed what happened to Edith and the rest of his family. At the time I knew that his younger brother Artur had managed to escape to Northern Rhodesia in 1938.

I had met Artur and his family many times as a child when they visited Port Elizabeth. But as for the fate of the rest of his family, it was as if there was an unstated agreement between father and son that this was a no-go zone. The year after the interview, my father died at the age of 84, and I had missed an opportunity to ask the question. My obsessive desire to know more about my father's family began to take root shortly after his death in 1990. The interview had prized open a window into the Robinski family's past, but there was still a stony silence about what happened to them in Berlin in the 1930s and during the war.

Nadine Fresco's interviews with the children of Holocaust survivors reveal what she refers to as the black hole of silence. The stories of death are never told. They are instead acted out symptomatically between parents and children. Fresco writes that "the forbidden memory of death" finds expression in attacks of pain that were often veiled behind "a screen of words [and] an unchanging story, a tale repeated over and over again, made up of selections from the war."[2] I never encountered such symptoms in my father. In my interview with him in 1989, he told me stories about his escape from Nazi Germany, but he was silent about what happened to his parents and siblings who did not get out. The single photograph of Edith and her mother and sister had to stand in as the silent repository for this forbidden memory of death and destruction.

Documentary photographs from traumatic pasts can both authenticate the past's existence and, in their flat two-dimensionality, also reveal its insurmountable distance. By contrast, family photographs promise to lessen the distance, bridge divides, and create the possibility for identification and affiliation.[3] When we look at family photographs from lost worlds, especially worlds destroyed by brute force, we don't simply look for information but instead seek out intimate and affectively charged connections to these pasts. As Marianne Hirsch writes,

> Small, two dimensional, delimited by their frame, photographs minimize the disaster they depict, and screen their viewers from it. But in seeming to open a window to the past, and materializing the viewer's relationship to it, they also give a glimpse of its enormity and its power. They tell us as much about our own needs and desires (as readers and spectators) as they can about the past world they presumably depict.[4]

---

[2] Cited in Hirsch 2012, p120-21.
[3] Hirsch 2012, p. 38.
[4] Hirsch 2012, p. 38.

In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes writes about how photographs can unsettle temporal, spatial and experiential borders.[5] The photograph of Edith complicates my sense of boundaries: between the past, the present and the future; between South Africa now and Germany then, and between Edith's experiences, my father's life and my own. As I write, her beautiful, sad eyes stare back at me. I try to interpret her look through what I already know. I constantly scan the surface of the photograph for clues about her life and that of my father. But her eyes simply stare back at me.

Hirsch also writes about how the children of survivors and exiles have very particular ways of looking at Holocaust photographs. They not only look at these images to forge stronger identifications with their parents whose lives were shattered by the catastrophe, they also try to reveal the hidden, impending violence that resides outside of the frame, as if by doing so they can protect their loved ones. Even though Edith's photograph looks like a conventional family portrait, and was taken in Berlin in 1937, before the Final Solution, I too try to unveil the unseen dangers. I look at this photograph with the full knowledge of what was happening outside of the frame. I know what is to come, and how what unfolded irrevocably changed my father's life.

---

[5] c.f. Hirsch, 2012, p.63

TWO

White noise in the suburbs

Top, left, Michael (with toy gun) and SR sitting on bed; on top right SR at preschool drawing board; bottom left Michael, my mother and SR in her arms; bottom right, SR at kindergarten with building blocks

I was born in 1959 in the middle class white suburb of Mill Park in the sea port city of Port Elizabeth. My parents provided my brother and me with a safe and secure childhood. Although we lived next to a golf course and country club that did not allow Jews to become members, this was not a problem as Jews could join their own bigger and better Wedgewood Park Country Club. Notwithstanding petty anti-Semitism, we lived comfortably and securely in our lily-white suburb. I grew up entirely oblivious to the fact that Jews had not always been so secure in their white skins.

As a child and teenager growing up in Port Elizabeth there were many gaps in my Jewish education. I assumed that Jews had always been considered white, middle class and respectable in my country of birth. Nobody told me that the working-class East European

Jews who arrived on South African shores in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not regarded as white enough by the European settler establishment. Instead, they were described as dirty, dishevelled, alien and unassimilable immigrants who ought to be sent back from whence they came. Upon arrival, these Yiddish-speaking immigrants set about trying to assimilate. They made sure that their children shed all signs of their parents' shameful *shtetl*[6] culture. Children learnt to speak the Queen's English and were schooled in white middle-class values and habits. In one generation, South African Jews became white Anglophiles. The price for this magical metamorphosis was the erasure of any traces of the Old Country, Yiddish and the grinding poverty that their parents and grandparents had sought to escape. I grew up without any knowledge of that *shtetl* world. Cultural amnesia became second nature.

Even if my parents' generation had known about this period during the 1900s when these Yiddish-speaking East European immigrants were seen as the scum of the earth, it is doubtful that they would have dwelt too much on it. They would not have wanted their children to know anything about this shameful past when Jews were an unwelcome, racialized Other. It was only in my adult years that I learnt about this.[7] It was also then that I discovered that prominent Afrikaner nationalists, including future prime ministers such as H.F. Verwoerd and B.J. Vorster, had actively supported Hitler's war effort.

The rampant anti-Semitism of the first half of the twentieth century must have alarmed South African Jews. But Germany's defeat in 1945 changed everything. The revelations of the death camps convinced Afrikaner Nationalist leaders to bury their Nazi pasts and invite Jews into the white laager. When the Afrikaner National Party came to power in 1948, its leaders immediately ditched the Jewish Question and turned their attention to the Native Question. Soon after taking office in 1948, the first National Party prime minister, D.F. Malan, met with a delegation of the Jewish Board of Deputies. The delegation left the meeting reassured that Jews would be accommodated under National Party rule. In May 1949 South Africa official recognised Israel, and in 1953 Prime Minister Malan became the first head of government to visit the newly established Jewish state. Malan returned to South Africa full of praise for Israel.[8] Around this time, South African Jews began to feel that they were becoming fully fledged members of the white fold. They

---

[6] The term *shtetl* refers to the Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe.

[7] Milton Shain, 1994. *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in South Africa.* Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press.

[8] Richard Mendelsohn and Milton Shain, 2008, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History.* Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, p.134

soon forgot about the war years when Nazism was sweeping through their country. They were no longer in the firing line. Relieved, they fully embraced their white status and became silent bystanders as the National Party began the nasty business of entrenching apartheid. Both Malan's party and most South African Jews agreed to forgive and forget Afrikaner nationalism's flirtation with fascism. The only ones who seemed to remember this were the Jewish communists.

As a young boy growing up in Port Elizabeth, I was never taught anything about the Jewish radicals: Joe Slovo, Ruth First, Pauline Podbrey, Arthur Goldreich, Denis Goldberg, Harold Wolpe, Baruch Hirschon, Ben Turok and so many others. Neither did I know then that among the 156 activists arrested and accused of treason against the apartheid state in 1956, 23 were white, and of these 14 were Jewish. The trial ended in 1961, the same year that the ANC initiated the armed struggle. In 1963, key ANC and South African Communist Party leaders were arrested at the SACP headquarters at Lilliesleaf Farm in Rivonia in Johannesburg; among the 17 arrested, all of the 5 whites were Jewish.[9] As in the Treason Trial, the defence team at the Rivonia Trial was largely made up of Jewish advocates. The Jewish establishment, fearful that these high-profile communists threatened their cosy rapprochement with Malan's National Party, left them to rot in prison and exile. This Faustian Pact secured the privileges that came with Jews' white status. It also cultivated a conservative Jewish culture of silence, acquiescence, compromise and, at times, outright complicity. By then, most Jews, including my family, had retreated into their fortified white suburban enclaves; they made absolutely sure that they kept their heads well below the parapets. The fifties and sixties also happened to be decades of growth and optimism for South African Jews. By 1970, they numbered almost 120 000 and their economic prospects looked promising.[10]

Despite the high walls, barking dogs, burglar alarms and round-the-clock policing in the white suburbs, I grew up in Mill Park Port Elizabeth with the diffuse sense of insecurity that plagued most white South Africans. I can remember double-checking the locks on the doors every night before going to sleep. I can also recall the repetitive dreams of burglars breaking into our suburban home. This was not pure paranoia. Our house was in fact routinely robbed when we went away on holidays. My unsettling dreams of house robberies mirrored an existential insecurity that afflicted most white South Africans besieged in

---

[9] Mendelsohn and Shain, 2008, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History*, p.148.

[10] Mendelsohn and Shain, 2008, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History*, p.150.

fortified suburbs patrolled by a police state created to protect white privilege. We lived in a precarious paradise at the tip of Africa.

The white suburbs were islands of wealth and privilege in a vast sea of black poverty and suffering. They were also islands of insularity and ignorance. My schooling provided me with little knowledge about the world beyond the garrisoned suburb of Mill Park. School textbooks simply retold the official Afrikaner Nationalist history of white conquest and domination. I learnt about the 1820 British Settlers and the heroic Afrikaner Great Trek into the interior. I also learnt how the Voortrekkers had made their Covenant with God after their victory over the Zulu king at Blood River, and how the Afrikaners came to see themselves as the Chosen People. I had thought that we Jews were the Chosen Ones. There were clearly contenders to the crown.

I lived most of my childhood in a middle-class Jewish bubble. At Theodor Herzl Primary School I learnt to take pride in Israel and being Jewish. I happened to be born in South Africa but, more importantly, I was Jewish. I venerated Herzl's Zionist movement that had fought so heroically for the creation of the Jewish State. Unquestioning loyalty to Israel was obligatory given Jews' long history of persecution. When the June 1967 Six Day War began I was eight years old and wanted to volunteer to fight for Israel. Almost 2 000 South African Jews actually volunteered for non-combatant service in Israel during the war; the largest contribution of any Diaspora Jewish community.[11] The South Africa government also allowed South African Jews to send funds to Israel for humanitarian purposes. This further strengthened ties between the two countries. I can remember celebrating Israel's swift, heroic victory. At the time I was entirely ignorant about the displacement of hundreds of thousands of indigenous Palestinians who were sacrificed to create the State of Israel two decades earlier. I only learnt about the Palestinian Nakba (catastrophe) of 1948 much later in my life.

Following my bar mitzvah at Glendiningvale Synagogue on 24 February 1973, I left Theodor Herzl for a Christian Nationalist government school called Grey High. I felt as if I had been expelled and exiled from the comfortable and safe Jewish bosom of Theodor Herzl. I was thrust into an unfamiliar and alien Christian world and had to find my feet fast. Soon after arriving at Grey High, I realised that it would be wise to drop any overt signs of Jewishness. Determined to fit in, I learnt how to submerge my Jewish identity. I had hardly settled into my new school when we were assigned Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* for our English literature class. The unflattering portrait of Shylock the Jew sent me into spasms of

[11] Mendelsohn and Shain, 2008, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History*, p..169.

shame and agonising self-consciousness. This gave me even more reason to bury my Jewish identity.

Growing up as a teenager in the conservative middle-class suburb of Mill Park triggered a spark of youthful rebellion. My dissent hardly qualified as revolutionary. It found expression in rebel music rather than Molotov cocktails or AK47s. My cultural icons of choice were Angela Davis, Miles Davis, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Bob Marley. Occasionally, my friend Vernon and I ventured beyond the pale world of the suburbs. We struck up a friendship with a young, aspiring black photographer who we would visit at his home in New Brighton township. I can recall attending Simphiwe's celebrations after he returned from weeks of seclusion in the bush as part of the Xhosa circumcision ritual. I also listened to black jazz musicians such as Hugh Masekela and Dollar Brand (later known as Abdullah Ibrahim). But that was about as far as it went in terms of challenging the racial straightjacket of our upbringing.

Despite being attracted to the forbidden fruits of black music and culture, I was ignorant of black South African history. High school history skipped over the bloody colonial wars of African dispossession and Xhosa resistance to white conquest in the Eastern Cape, where I grew up. Unlike the school history that my children learnt, my history lessons were silent about settler violence and massacres against San hunter gatherers and Khoi pastoralists whose ancestors had lived in the Cape, thousands of years before I was born. These books were also silent about the migration of African agriculturalists into the region from the north some 2000 years earlier. Official accounts of white settler history conjured up fantasies of vast tracts of unoccupied land waiting for Europeans to colonise. These coloinial myths also failed to mention African nationalist heroes such as Sol Plaatjie, the founding figure of the African National Congress who had been part of a delegation to petition the English Parliament about African land dispossession following the infamous 1913 Land Act. A fearful silence also hovered over the white suburbs about the elusive African resistance fighter, the Black Pimpernel, the man who was later to be incarcerated on Robben Island for over two decades.

I grew up in the 1960s in the shadow of white fears of black insurrection in a country that had become a police state specialising in terror and torture. Black resistance to white supremacy was shrouded in secrecy and ignorance. Whites were trained to believe that the security forces had everything under control, even as ANC cadres bombed electricity pylons, post offices and police stations. I was born only a few months before the 21 March 1960 Sharpeville Massacre in which sixty-nine black South African

demonstrators were killed by heavily armed police. Then came the banning of the ANC and PAC, the imprisonment of Mandela, and hundreds of activists were either forced into exile or else became political prisoners on Robben Island. I was seven years old when, in 1966, Prime Minister Verwoerd was assassinated by Demitrious Tsafendas. The assassin, a middle-aged man of mixed racial identity, claimed in court that he had been provoked to plunge a knife into Verwoerd's body because of secret messages from tapeworms in his stomach. Tsafendas spent the rest of his years in a psychiatric institution. I remember our black gardener celebrating when he heard about Verwoerd's death. Since I liked the gardener and regarded him as my friend, I surmised that Verwoerd must have been a really bad apple.

By my early teens, I had developed an inchoate awareness of apartheid's injustices. I can remember my father being puzzled when I would automatically back black boxers whenever they fought white opponents. I can also recall, at the start of the June 1976 uprisings against the government, that I instinctively supported the black African students who took to the streets armed with stones. Our Xhosa domestic worker would breathlessly regale me tales of raging street battles between black students and the heavily armed white police. I can only speculate about why I supported the black boxers and township students. Perhaps it was because of an empathy with the oppressed derived from what happened to my father's family in Germany. Maybe it was due to an intuitive sense that South African Jews were once insider-outsiders in a colonial outpost where their white status was questioned. Whatever it was, I routinely rooted for the underdog David against the gigantic Goliath.

***

SR, on the right, doing Jack Kerouac "on the road" (with Simon Stanford on the left).

In 1978, after completing high school, I began a BA degree at the University of Cape Town. It was a time of revolution in the streets and torture in the prisons. University studies were a revelation. I learnt that apartheid was simply the latest phase of centuries of conquest and

racial domination of black South Africans. Seduced by Marxism and radical politics, I soon became a card-carrying member of a long-haired and shabbily dressed crew of pale revolutionaries. We embraced minimalist, counter-cultural lifestyles saturated with muddled symbolic gestures of solidarity with the African proletariat. We read *The Communist Manifesto*, bought our food supplies from veggie co-ops, lived in dirty, rundown digs in Observatory, drank cheap red wine and smoked far too much dope. This lifestyle was generally not very good for our mental health, and a few of us lost our minds. But most of us somehow stayed on track and ended up with professional careers and middle class lifestyles. Despite all our student rebelliousness, one thing we were always shtum about was the embarrassing fact that our bourgeois parents were bankrolling our bohemian lifestyles.

Portrait of the young man as a hippy-cum-lefty, Cape Town, c.1980.

During my student years in Cape Town, my Jewishness and my father's family background were far off the radar for me. Many of my left-wing varsity friends from those times did not even know I was Jewish. Marx had revealed to us that ethnicity and religion were simply ideological forms of false consciousness. It was working-class consciousness that really mattered. So we, the pampered children of the bourgeoisie, committed ourselves to worker solidarity rather than ethnic or religious identifications.

SR's minor contribution to non-racial football in Gugulethu, Cape Town c.1980

In 1985, after having completed my BA Honours studies, I spent a year travelling around Europe. I stayed at backpacker lodges and did piecemeal jobs. In London I worked as a manual labourer at building sites. After a few months of loading rubble onto dumpsters, my body rebelled and I had to quit this backbreaking job. I chose to migrate to warmer and cheaper southern Europe. I soon found work at a backpacker's lodge in Athens which, soon after my arrival, was converted into a brothel. Since I was out of work, I joined a Dutch fellow-backpacker in a hedonistic spree of Greek island hopping. Our days were spent sunbathing, swimming, drinking cheap Greek wine in the evenings and falling asleep on the beaches. I eventually tired of this lazy lifestyle, and joined the throngs of drifters making their way across the Mediterranean Sea to Haifa in Israel. For me, this was no Aliyah pilgrimage to the Promised Land. It was simply the next logical destination for our caravan of freewheeling drifters. Like Jack Kerouac's Beat Generation, we were on the road and trying to go with the flow. Soon after arriving in Israel, I made my way to a kibbutz. Everything was taken care of at Kibbutz Degania Bet on the Sea of Galilee (Kinneret). It was my paradise on earth, my Garden of Eden.

On one of my days of leave from the kibbutz, I visited the Holocaust exhibition at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. The exhibition unsettled me, but I made no personal connection to what I was seeing. I was also indifferent to the Jewish character of Israel. I was definitely not there to consummate any Zionist longings and commitments. I simply saw myself as another cash-strapped backpacker searching for a comfortable place to lay my head before moving on. On a visit to Tel Aviv, I bumped into a beautiful, dark, green-eyed Israeli. I had briefly met her while working at a backpacker's lodge in London a few months earlier. Following this accidental encounter on the streets of Tel Aviv, I became besotted with my new Israeli girlfriend. Shiri lived with her parents in Tel Aviv, and would visit the kibbutz on weekends or else I would catch a bus bound for her most cosmopolitan of Israeli cities.

During the week I worked in the kibbutz kitchen with elderly women with strong German and Eastern European accents. I never asked them questions about the numbers tattooed on some of their forearms. I made no connection between these elderly tattooed women and the photograph of the three women in our home in Port Elizabeth. Israel, my visit to Yad Vashem, and the elderly survivors on the kibbutz elicited no sense of connection to my family's past, or the Zionist lessons of my youth. I did not see my time in Israel as an ethnic roots quest for a Jewish homeland. I was simply basking in my care-free backpacker's paradise. But, like all bubbles, mine was waiting to burst.

An Internet image of Deganya Bet Kibbutz; my bubble on the banks of the Sea of Galilee Sea is now an upmarket tourist destination. As the advert put its: "Degania Bet Kibbutz Country Lodging is a short walk from the Sea of Galilee. It offers lots of leisure facilities, including a swimming pool and indoor football and basketball courts."

My idyllic existence at Deganya Bet began to be infiltrated by a creeping realisation that I would soon have to make some serious decisions about my future. The time of drifting was swiftly drawing to a close. I had to choose between either marrying Shiri and settling down to raise a family in Israel, or else wandering off into the big wide world to discover who I really was and what I wanted to do with my life. A jazz musician acquaintance in Tel Aviv recommended New York as the perfect place to shake me out of my kibbutz-induced daze. I sadly left Shiri and my paradise on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. I had just enough money to buy a one-way ticket to New York on a low-budget Peoples' Express flight.

I made my way to a cheap backpacker's apartment in downtown Manhattan. Almost everyone staying there was young and seeking fame and glory. They came from all over the planet lugging their art and photographic portfolios, musical instruments or film scripts. They had come to make it the Big Apple. Here I was in the cultural centre of the universe and I had to come up with something fast. I needed to find a job and a career or else I would sink into the swamp without a trace.

One freezing winter's day, sparkling with crisp, clean white snow and lit up by bright blue skies, I took a visit New York's Natural History Museum. While wandering through the exhibits, I overheard a tall, grey-haired man in a tweed jacket deeply immersed in what sounded to me like high-brow scholarly discussion. I was desperate. I walked up to this donnish man, and introduced myself as a student of anthropology. I told him I looking for any sort of research job. My chutzpah paid off. It turned out that he was a professor of East Asian Studies at Columbia University. We soon found ourselves immersed in deep discussion about social engineering disasters ranging from apartheid's Bantustans to Mao's Cultural Revolution and ending with Stalin's collectivization catastrophe. Before we parted company, he suggested I make enquiries at Columbia University's Department of Anthropology about doctoral study fellowships.

A few days later, on another bright and bitterly cold New York winter's day, I stumbled through the thick snow to Columbia University's Upper West Side campus.

Carrying a copy of my Honours thesis, I accosted two professors in the corridor of the Anthropology Department. They seemed intrigued by this wild-eyed white South African. They advised me apply for a doctoral fellowship in their department. A short while later I discovered that my application had been successful. I was ecstatic; this was my lifeline. It was a pathway to a proper career. From back-breaking manual labour in London to chopping up vegetables on the banks of the Galilee, and now I was about to embark on doctoral studies at the illustrious Columbia University. This was an unimaginable breakthrough. In September 1986, having recently lost both my sweet Shiri and my kibbutz paradise on the Kinneret, I began my new life at Columbia University.

Studying and living in the Upper Westside of Manhattan exposed me to the heady, cosmopolitan world of anthropology, art, film, theatre and music. I met students from all over the planet and learnt from them how parochial my South African upbringing had been. The robust seminars by radical African students and scholars at Columbia University's African Studies Centre were an eye opener for a Jewish *boytjie* from small-town Port Elizabeth; so too were the student parties. After the suffocating provincialism of apartheid South Africa, the Big Apple was intoxicating.

Then, in July 1989, during one of my varsity vacations in Cape Town, I decided to interview my father on tape about his life. As an anthropology student who was interested in life histories, I thought it was time to show some interest in my own family history and cultural heritage. We sat down in my parents' living room with the sound of seagulls and waves crashing down on the white sands of the beach opposite their Sea Point flat. I wanted my father to start at the beginning. I wanted to know where in Poland he was born, what his early childhood and family memories were, and what he remembered from his youth and adult years in Berlin. I sometimes replay the tape just to hear his gravelly German-accented voice again.

THREE

Breaking the Silence in My Father's House

Apart from hearing my father's thick German accent and his smattering of Yiddish words, as a child growing up in Port Elizabeth I was exposed to virtually nothing of his European roots. He had left everything behind, and he probably also assumed that nobody, especially his sons, needed to hear about his tragic story. The only other family link to his German past was his younger brother. Artur had escaped Germany in 1938 and ended up in the small Copperbelt town of Ndola in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). The two brothers became very close. Their profound loss and displacement had cemented their relationship.

After initially struggling to make a living in Port Elizabeth, my father found employment as a salesman for a small retail clothing store. On 1 June 1955, having already established his own retail business, he married Ruth Rom, a South African-born Jewess from a family with Eastern European ancestry. My brother and I were raised in a thoroughly Anglicized middle-class home. We had no sense of our German or Eastern European ancestry. We even had an English surname – Robins – which had been changed from Robinski. Uncle Artur had told me as a child that a Robinski was skiing in the Swiss Alps when he lost his skis, and since then we called ourselves Robins. In fact, the change happened in the late 1930s, when one of my father's South African relatives, who happened to be a magistrate in the Karoo, decided to change his name from Robinski to Robins. It is quite possible that rising anti-Semitism during this period triggered this name change. My

father once told me that the Karoo magistrate had changed his name to boost his chances of promotion in the then English-dominated state bureaucracy. My father and the rest of the family thought this was a good idea and followed suit. The magistrate in question was David Robinski, the son of my great uncle Eugen. So, I grew up with the incongruity of having an English-sounding surname and a father with a thick German accent. But neither my brother nor I asked questions about this odd juxtaposition. This had to wait until much later when, in 1989, I interviewed my father on tape about his life in Germany.

You can hear my mother's voice in the background, interjecting, correcting and elaborating upon my father's account. The interview, done a year before my father passed away, became my window into his life in Europe. I learnt that my father, Herbert Leopold Robinski, had been born on 29 March 1907 in the northern Prussian town of Strasburg (now Brodnica, Poland). His grandfather had been an innkeeper and fisherman in Tatmischken, a small village within the administrative district of Rucken (also called Tilsit) in East Prussia, close to the border of what is now Lithuania. My great-grandfather had six sons who scattered all across Europe. David, my father's father, lived in Strasburg, Isidore in Konigsberg (now Kalingrad, Russia), Max moved to Elbing, Adolf lived in Pirmasens (Germany), Eugen immigrated to South Africa, and another son, whose name my father couldn't recall, ended up in France. My father could only remember the name of one of his father's sisters, Pauline. I asked him who Eugen was. I was curious that a Robinski had come to South Africa before my father. My father's brief response was that Eugen had emigrated from Prussia in 1888, and he ended up in the small Karoo town of Williston where he became a successful local businessman and hotel owner. That was all I knew about my great-uncle until much later.

As a child, my parents dragged me off on Sunday afternoons to tea at Aunt Evelyn Rakki's home in the middle-class suburb of Summerstrand. It was only many years later that I learnt that Aunt Evelyn was one of Eugen's daughters from his second marriage. Also present at these occasions were Eugen's other two daughters, my aunts Lily and Laura. All I knew about these sisters was that they were our relatives. I can recall that Aunt Lily's husband, Ewald Nagel, spoke English with an even more pronounced German accent than my father. Eugen's three daughters were the bedrock of my father's family life in Port Elizabeth. They were also the reason that Hetty Levy - one of Eugen's daughters from his first marriage – managed to persuade my father to leave Cape Town in 1936 and move with her and her young son Harold to Port Elizabeth.

Eugen's brother, David Robinski, was born on 16 May 1878 in Rucken, East Prussia. In 1904, David married my grandmother, Cecilie Gruenberg, who was born in Grindzaw in

East Prussia on 24 November 1882. The marriage had been arranged by a *shadchen.* This traditional Jewish match maker, or marriage agent, sent David to the Gruenberg home in Strasburg so that he could choose from the four marriageable Gruenberg daughters. David made his choice and began married life in Strasburg, where he opened an inn with a bar and grocery shop. It was in this small Prussian town, bordering Russia, that my father and his brothers were born: Siegfried in 1905, Herbert in 1907 and Artur in 1909. Then David became frustrated with the meagre income from the inn and moved the family to Culmsee (now Chelmza, Poland), where he owned a shoe shop called Salamander.

Until I was in my forties, the only photograph I had seen of my grandfather was of him standing in front of his Culmsee shoe shop, *Salamander Schuhwaren.* The rest of the family are lined up in front of the shop window. My grandfather stands on his own next to the entrance while, some distance from him, my grandmother stands next to three of her children, who are lined up from tallest to shortest. I assume the woman in the white apron is the family's housekeeper, the one that my grandfather was having an affair with. Standing next to the housekeeper is a taller young boy with a cap and carrying a bag, possibly my father's oldest brother, Siegfried. A young man stands to the far left at a distance to the rest; he is probably not a family member. Behind the family, other bystanders look on. Although the resolution of the photograph is too poor to make out facial features, for many years this was the only photograph of my grandfather and of Siegfried.

My grandparents Cecilie and David Robinsky with their children outside the family's shoe store in Culmsee, n.d.

At the start of the First World War, the towns of Strasburg and Culmsee, although still part of Prussia, were predominantly Polish-speaking. The Robinsky family were outsiders in two senses. They were German-speakers living amongst a Polish majority *and* they were Jewish. Despite frequent incidents of anti-Semitism, my father recalled being quite happy there. His three sisters – Edith, Hildegard and Erika - were born in Culmsee during the war. Erika

died of starvation as an infant due to wartime shortages of milk and food. During the war years living conditions worsened and street riots became commonplace. Poles rose up against the unwanted imposition of German culture and violent protests erupted against the compulsory teaching of German in schools. On 8 January 1919, local Poles attacked a Prussian (Grenzschutz) Unit and were repelled when the Germans shelled the town with artillery. On 21 January 1919, following the Treaty of Versailles, Culmsee once again became part of Poland. Following the treaty, some 2000 German-speakers were deported to Germany. After Culmsee was handed back to Poland, the combination of a failing business and rising anti-Semitism, together with growing anti-German feelings, persuaded David Robinski to move westwards, to Berlin. He arrived there in 1920, and the rest of the family followed shortly thereafter. The Robinski family were never to see the town of Culmsee again. On the 26th October 1939, the Germans incorporated the town into the Third Reich, and it was captured by the Red Army on 23rd January 1945.

When my wife and I visited Brodnica (Strasburg) and Chelmza (Culmsee) in 1999, the only evidence we found of the Robinski family were birth certificates in the town archives. In Brodnica an old woman pointed to a small open patch of ground and spoke in Polish and broken English. I couldn't understand what she said. I speculated that she was saying the place was once a Jewish cemetery, or a synagogue. Perhaps she was simply saying that Jews had once lived there. We found no signs of official commemorations of the presence of Jews in these two Polish towns that my family came from. It was as if the Robinski family and so many other Polish Jews in these small towns had never been there.

Following the interview with my father, I began the long and painstaking process of trying to piece together a picture of his family. My grandfather had come alive for me through a couple of my father's anecdotes. The first concerned my grandfather's experiences on the Italian Front during the First World War. I assume he must have thought that serving his country would secure his rights as a patriotic German citizen. Instead, his war experiences left him thoroughly disillusioned with the Kaiser and all he stood for. One day, upon returning to Culmsee on leave from the Italian Front, he was walking down the street carrying two suitcases when he passed a young lieutenant without saluting. When the lieutenant insisted on being saluted my grandfather began swearing at him and chased him down the street. By then there was widespread disillusionment in the ranks, and David Robinski, although not politically inclined, was fed up with the Kaiser and his military adventures. Even though he had been awarded an Iron Cross, he came home one day and tore off his uniform and threw it into the fireplace in disgust. Not only had his health dramatically deteriorated while serving on

the Italian Front, but his family were struggling financially. He must have been devastated by Erika's death from starvation during the war. After the war, economic conditions worsened and my grandfather resorted to smuggling gold. As my father recalled:

> The next thing, every five minutes he was travelling to Berlin. We didn't know then but afterwards we found that he was smuggling gold. He was buying up gold coins and took them to Germany. I still remember, I've seen my mother making sandwiches for the trip putting butter and gold on the bread and meat or cheese over that to hide the gold.

David Robinski and his eldest son Siegfried were arrested one day for smuggling; they were released a week or two later with a fine. My grandfather, desperate to keep the family afloat, managed to acquire a shoe shop in Berlin. But the business was not doing well, so my grandfather took to gambling to supplement the floundering business. Meanwhile, he continued his affair with his saleslady-cum-housekeeper, and regularly visited spas, ostensibly for health reasons, but my father suspected that there was more to it. In 1920, my grandfather decided that that it was time for my father to join him in Berlin:

> He was lonely there. So I was just 12 or 13 when I came to Berlin…In Culmsee there were two fellows who were going to Berlin. My mother contacted them and they said, yes, they'll take me along, sure, sure. In the meantime, as soon as we came to the station, they gave me a watch, another watch, two watches and some money, some gold coins; they gave this to me to travel over the frontier. They delivered me in Berlin. By then I didn't have the watches any more, and I didn't have the coins either any more. They took them back of course. But this was a sort of easy way to get the things out of the country. There I came to the flat in Berlin where my father lived with that girl; she looked after the shop and she looked after the house too…

My grandfather's gold-smuggling stunts across the Polish-German border had an afterlife in my father's obsession with getting money out of South Africa. He had bank accounts in Switzerland and the United States and, in the aftermath of the Soweto uprising in 1976, he successfully applied for a Green Card to the United States. There was much talk of moving to San Diego but nothing came of it. Like so many other South African Jews, my father needed an emergency exit strategy, just in case. I inherited these fears and had my metaphorical suitcases

packed and ready under my bed. Having lived through two world wars must have left their mark on my father in other ways as well. In his old age he would routinely pilfer small items like batteries and razor blades from departmental stores. These petty shoplifting episodes were probably symptoms of the war years, when the Robinski sons were forced to steal food to keep the family going. The past seemed to constantly leak into our Port Elizabeth home.

My father was thirteen years old when he arrived in Berlin. He told me that he couldn't get into a school in Berlin because he had not studied compulsory subjects such as Latin. Financial difficulties also contributed to his father's decision that he should abandon schooling prematurely. Three years after arriving in Berlin, at the age of sixteen, my father was sent off to become an apprentice salesman for Herr Finkelstein, an uncle who lived in Gumbinnen in East Prussia. Working conditions were unpleasant and Herr Finkelstein treated him poorly: "I was the only employee. I had full board and slept in a little storeroom next to the very small shop. I had to stay in also on Sundays when my uncle went out for drives with his family in his car. After about two and a half years I had enough. I wired the old man that I want to come back home". My father returned to Berlin where he found work as a junior salesman at a well-known Jewish-owned departmental store called Tietz.

Meanwhile, from 1925 onwards, David Robinski, his wife Cecilie, daughters Edith and Hildegard and his youngest son Artur were living in Walnertheaterstrasse 45 in Berlin's central district of Mitte. The oldest son, Siegfried, an industrial worker, was living in Naunynstrase in Kreuzberg with his wife, also named Edith. David's shoe business soon went bankrupt and he began to spend more time gambling and playing *skat*, his favourite card game. With business opportunities looking bleak, he must have thought that things could not get much worse. Then, in 1933, Hitler came to power. At that point, my grandfather's decision to move his family to Berlin must have weighed heavily on him.

FOUR

My father's flight from hell

By 1933 my father had been promoted to the position of senior salesman and manager of the linen, cotton and fabric section of the large Tietz-owned department store in Erfurt called *Kaufhaus Romischer Kaiser*. He had a staff of about twenty and recalled that he was very comfortable and happy there.

A few years ago, my wife Lauren found a postcard-size photograph of my father and eight other men enjoying themselves playing indoor bowls. This photograph was possibly taken when my father was working at *Kaufhaus Romischer Kaiser*. All but one of the men in the photograph are wearing white shirts, ties and waistcoats; this was probably their work attire. I have no idea who the other men are, and can only guess that they are his work colleagues. My father is at the centre of the photograph about to roll the ball. The others are joking and fooling around; my father is grinning and seems to be thoroughly enjoying the camaraderie of the boys' night out. This is the only photograph, apart from those on passport and travel documents, I have of my father before he left Germany. My wife was struck by the close resemblance between my father as a young man and my older brother, Michael. I am struck that my father looks so comfortable and at home amongst his convivial colleagues. The photograph was taken between 1933 and 1936. I am puzzled by how ordinary this scene is. I search for hidden signs of threat lurking within the frame. I find none.

Like the photograph of my grandmother and her two daughters taken in Berlin in 1937, this photograph of my father playing bowls triggers in me an unsettling sense of foreboding. I look at the photograph with the full knowledge of what is about to unfold. It is

like a snapshot of the last rays of sunlight before the long, black night. But the photograph also reassures me that my father had good times with friends and colleagues before he had to flee. There is a tension between this comforting thought and an inchoate sense of danger in the shadows, outside of the frame. This photograph captures a moment before my father's comfortable bachelor's life in Erfurt began to unravel.

My father's world was turned upside down the year the Nazis came to power. A young gentile woman who lived in the apartment above his would sometimes visit him and they would talk or listen to records or the radio. They were not romantically involved. Then one day she visited him wearing with two Swastika earrings. My father could not restrain himself. He told her that her earrings looked so beautiful that she should consider putting one in her nose. The Swastika lady was furious and stormed out. A few days later my father was arrested at work. Trying to maintain a semblance of normality and respectability, he asked the uniformed policemen to walk a little distance behind him so it did not look like an arrest. When they arrived at the police station all semblance of decorum disintegrated. A policeman looked at the charge sheet stating that my father had ridiculed Nazi state symbols and screamed, 'You bastard, you bloody Jew, you're running down our government! That is going to come to an end now. You dirty Jew! Get out!' My father was taken to the *Festung* (military prison) where he met a prison warden from the old Weimar Republic era who my father sensed was not a Nazi supporter: 'Can't you shut up, can't you keep your bloody mouth shut. How dare you open your mouth these days, don't you know what's going on. Don't you know you cannot fight the Nazis with words?' My father was visibly shaken and confused by what was happening to him, and asked this sympathetic warden if he could help him in any way.

> "I can't do anything but I'm going to put you together with one of your fellow Jews (*globbensnossen*)," said the warden. He opened the cell and there was a fellow by the name of Samuel Tannenbaum, one of my salesmen, who says, "'*Guten tag Herr Robinski ver getz heer*... Here you're welcome, but there is no such a thing as boss and salesman. It doesn't exist here", he says, "Here we are on the same level."

It was in this prison in Erfurt in 1933 that my father came up against the raw reality of Nazi terror. One day he heard that the wife of Schapiro, a Jewish man who had been in the adjacent cell, had arrived at the prison. She accused the Nazi wardens of murdering her husband. Schapiro had been arrested for doing printing work for the Communist Party in Erfurt even though at the time the party was still legal. He was killed in prison and his wife

was later arrested on the grounds that she was telling people that the Nazis had murdered her husband. In prison she was warned to stop making these accusations or else she would face a similar fate to her husband: 'We know you have three children. We will let you out of prison. But if you dare open your mouth about your husband you will be back in prison and it will be the end of you.' So she was released. My father never heard what happened to her.

I recently did an Internet search on my father's cellmate, Waldemar Schapiro. I found that he was one of the Nazis' first political victims. At the time he worked as a clerk for a company that sold office machines and stationary supplies. Although he was connected to the Communist Party in Erfurt, he was not a member. He had, however, assisted with the publication of a banned left-wing newspaper, and for this he was arrested, jailed and tortured. He was then held in the police prison in Petersberg in Erfurt for four months before being shot in the head in July 1933 by a group of Nazi *Sturmabteilung* (SA) men.

I can only speculate about how my father's prison experiences must have affected him. They must have left a deep scar in his psyche and shattered his sense of confidence and security. Although he must have been very aware of the Nazis' blind hatred of Jews, communists, social democrats and homosexuals from Hitler's rabble-rousing speeches of the 1920s and early 1930s, what he experienced in prison went well beyond Nazi hate speech and political rhetoric; it was raw brutality and terror. I wonder what he told his family, friends and work colleagues about this prison experience. Did he feel reluctant to reveal to them the full horror of what he had witnessed? How would they have responded to his accounts of the Nazis' treatment of enemies of the state? He may have tried to protect those closest to him from the full knowledge of what happened. What I do know is that as a young boy growing up in Port Elizabeth I sensed his visceral fear of officialdom. In my early twenties, when I was a University of Cape Town student, he would anxiously warn me against getting involved in left-wing student politics.

***

I grew up in the shadows of my father's encounters with Nazi terror. I can recall how his experiences of prison in 1933 leaked into my safe cocoon in the bourgeois suburb of Mill Park. I was eighteen years old at the time and had just finished high school. It was 1978 and I was studying photography at the Port Elizabeth Technikon. Prime Minister B.J. Vorster, the former Nazi sympathiser, had turned South Africa into a police state. The one of the big difference between Vorster's regime and the Nazis police state was that Jews were full citizens in South Africa whereas blacks were subjected to a battery of racially discriminatory laws, repression and violence.

While walking through Port Elizabeth's bustling city centre and photographing people I saw in the streets, I stumbled across the sight of a black woman being dragged into the Baakens Street police station. She looked badly injured and unconscious. I instinctively squeezed the shutter. I instantaneously realised that I had better disappear, fast. Before I could get around the street corner to safety, two burly policemen charged towards me. They escorted me back to the charge office, where I was bombarded with questions: Why was I photographing a police station, did I not know that it was forbidden to photograph government key point installations? I told them I was studying photography and snapped away at whatever I saw of interest through my viewfinder. My lack of cooperation prompted them to call in Major Philips. I was equally stubborn and uncooperative with the major. He also quickly lost his patience and demanded to meet my parents. He wanted to search my bedroom at home to see whether I was in possession of banned political pamphlets and literature. When my father opened the front door and saw the major, he spluttered: "Major, can I get you a drink? How can I help you?" Philips asked to search my bedroom. This only intensified my father's anxiety. Seeing him in such a state made me realise that I had better pretend to cooperate.

The major found no subversive literature under my bed, but when he left he took my camera with him. He told me to come to the Port Elizabeth security police headquarters at the top floor of the Sanlam Building the next day. I would then get the camera back. When I entered the security police offices on sixth floor of the building, I immediately sensed I was in a space of unspeakable terror. I could smell fear and death oozing from the walls, ceilings and floorboards. Well-known anti-apartheid activists had been tortured and killed here. On 6 September 1977, barely a year earlier, a Black Consciousness activist named Steve Bantubonke Biko had been brutally beaten by security policeman in one of these rooms on the sixth floor; Biko had later died as a result of these injuries. Major Philips and another large, menacing-looking policeman were waiting for me. They played good cop, bad cop. Major Philips was quiet and impassive while the brute screamed accusations and abuse at me. "What the fuck were you doing photographing a police station? You are looking for *kak* [shit] and you will find it." And so it went on. Eventually I was given back my bulky Nikkormat FTN camera, along with prints of all the photographs, except the one of the woman being dragged into the police station. They kept all my negatives.

My father's sight of Major Philips at the door entrance must have triggered a flashback to Erfurt, 1933. There were sound reasons to be fearful of the South African security police. My father must have known what had happened to Biko a year earlier. He

most likely recognised resemblances between the apartheid police state and the Nazi regime he had fled. I inherited my father's fears. My brief encounter with the security police in the Sanlam Building in 1978 taught me to keep my head below the parapets.

***

During a visit to Erfurt in 2009, I went to Petersberg Prison where my father had been incarcerated. Standing in front of the prison I tried to imagine what my father had witnessed first-hand inside these prison walls and how this must have given him a clear understanding of what was coming. He had seen the writing on the wall earlier than most German Jews. This had galvanised him into action.

Kontroll- Nº 408

Jüdischer Kulturbund Erfurt

Geschäftsstelle Karthäuserring 14

Fernsprecher 22259

Mitgliedskarte

für das Bundesjahr 1935/36

Eigenhändige Unterschrift des Inhabers:

Name: Herbert Robinski

Ort: Erfurt

PERSONENBESCHREIBUNG

Beruf: Kaufmann

Geburtsort: Strasburg

Geburtstag: 29. 3. 1907

Wohnort: Erfurt

Gestalt: groß

Gesicht: oval

Farbe der Augen: braun

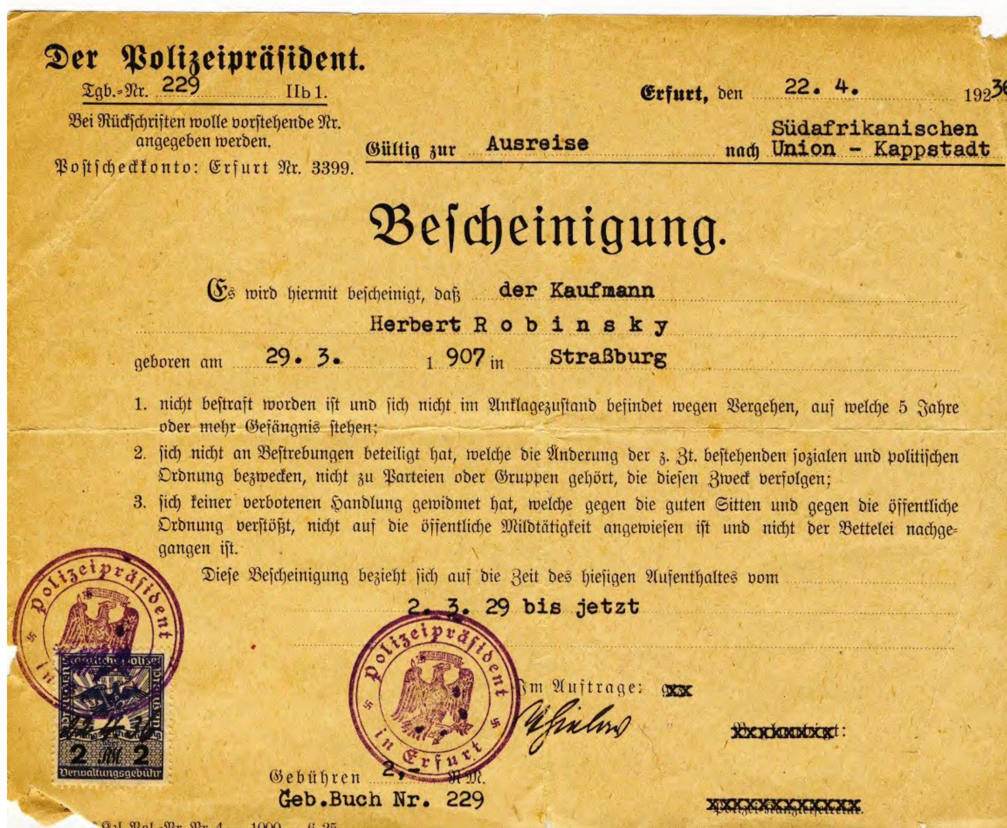
Farbe des Haares: braun

Besond. Kennzeichen: keine

KINDER

Name	Alter	Geschlecht

Left, my father's 1935/36 membership card of the Jewish Cultural Organisation in Erfurt; Right, my father's German passport that he used to leave Germany in 1936.



Der Polizeipräsident.

Tgb.-Nr. 229 IIb 1.

Bei Rückschriften wolle vorstehende Nr. angegeben werden.

Postscheckkonto: Erfurt Nr. 3399.

Erfurt, den 22. 4. 1936

Gültig zur Ausreise nach Südafrikanischen Union - Kappstadt

Bescheinigung.

Es wird hiermit bescheinigt, daß der Kaufmann Herbert R o b i n s k y geboren am 29. 3. 1907 in Straßburg

1. nicht bestraft worden ist und sich nicht im Anklagezustand befindet wegen Vergehen, auf welche 5 Jahre oder mehr Gefängnis stehen;
2. sich nicht an Bestrebungen beteiligt hat, welche die Änderung der z. Zt. bestehenden sozialen und politischen Ordnung bezwecken, nicht zu Parteien oder Gruppen gehört, die diesen Zweck verfolgen;
3. sich keiner verbotenen Handlung gewidmet hat, welche gegen die guten Sitten und gegen die öffentliche Ordnung verstößt, nicht auf die öffentliche Mildtätigkeit angewiesen ist und nicht der Bettelei nachgegangen ist.

Diese Bescheinigung bezieht sich auf die Zeit des hiesigen Aufenthaltes vom 2. 3. 29 bis jetzt

Im Auftrage:

Gebühren 2,- RM.

Geb.Buch Nr. 229

Polizeipräsident in Erfurt

2 RM 2 Verwaltungsgebühr

Herbert's police clearance certificate for emigration to South Africa, Erfurt, 22 April 1936

Upon his release on bail a few weeks later, my father was told that his case was being referred to a higher court and that he could not leave Erfurt without permission. He spent the next three years secretly planning his escape. Meanwhile, life had become increasingly dangerous for Jews as the Nazis spread their rule of terror throughout German society.

In the 1989 interview my father told me about a heated argument that he had with one of his junior salesmen at *Romischer Kaiser* over state-mandated prices of goods. The salesman, who also happened to be a card-carrying Nazi, told my father, '"Herr Robinski, I warn you. If you bring up the prices, I'm going to report you."' So my father did nothing; he did not report the incident or even reprimand him. He also recalled seeing another work colleague at a Nazi rally. The colleague was screaming, "Don't buy from Jews, don't buy from Jews", even though he worked for a Jewish company. On Labour Day one of the Jewish directors of the company, Siegfried Pinthus, had to make a speech lauding the accomplishments of the Third Reich. Pinthus stood up, raised his arm in the Nazi salute, and addressed the *Romischer Kaiser* staff. In the front row seats there were about twenty uniformed Nazis. As my father recalled, Pinthus made the appropriate noises praising the German Volk.

My father was a charming and debonair bachelor and had a number of gentile girlfriends in Erfurt. But this must have been risky after the Nazis outlawed marriage and sexual relations between Gentile and Jewish Germans. One of his non-Jewish girlfriends in Erfurt had managed to get a room in the same apartment building - my father lived on the ground floor and she was on the fourth. They would see each other in secret, but this was risky. During the interview he recalled fearing that if the Nazis had caught her, they would have cut off all of her hair. "I don't know what else they would have done to her," he said. "I was very careful with my gentile girlfriends. The one who risked her life was Margaret. We still met but secretly at her residence, not at mine any more". Given Nazi obsessions with blood purity, my father was living dangerously. His prison experiences in 1933 must have convinced him that he was living on borrowed time.

My father probably chose to flee to South Africa because his uncle Eugen and his children lived there. On 14 May 1936, he arrived in Cape Town on board an Italian ship called the *Duilio*. He had little time to reflect upon what he had left behind and had to find his feet quickly in this new and strange country. The *Dulio* had barely docked when pro-Nazi Afrikaner nationalists and Greyshirts launched their mass protests against the entry of German Jews into South Africa. A year later the Smuts-Hertzog United Party government introduced the Aliens Act, which effectively closed the door to German Jewish refugees. Earlier, the 1930 Quota Act had restricted Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. Then,

with the rise to power of Hitler, German Jewish immigration spiked from 400 annually in prior years, to 596 in 1933, and peaking to 865 in the following year. Although these numbers were relatively small, following the passage of the Nuremberg Laws of September 1935 there was the very real possibility that immigration would rise even further. This scenario was pre-empted by the 1936 Immigration Amendment Act. From then on bonds or guarantees were no longer acceptable, and immigrants had to make a cash deposit of £100 for an adult and £50 for a child. Since the Nazi government did not allow refugees to leave with more than RM 10 (less than £1), from November 1936 onwards it became practically impossible for German Jewish refugees to get into South Africa. Yet, my father had to somehow pull off the miraculous by rescuing the rest of his family.

Left, a photograph of the Stuttgart which arrived in Cape Town in 1936 with 500 German Jewish refugees; right German Jewish refugees landing at Cape Town harbour after having evaded those protesting against Jewish immigration into South Africa. The caption is: "The Warning Sign".

The same year that my father arrived in South Africa, the *Stuttgart* left in Bremen bound for Cape Town with over five hundred German Jewish refugees. The 13, 000 tonne tourist liner had been chartered in late October 1936 in order to beat the impending introduction of even more restrictive immigration legislation. The Council for German Jews in London, and the respected German Jewish leader Reverend Dr Leo Baeck, had pleaded with the Jewish Board of Deputies in South Africa for support, but the Board responded cautiously, fearing a public backlash that would jeopardise future Jewish immigration. The board also feared that it could intensify anti-Semitism in South Africa and boost pro-Nazi support in the country. Following pressure from Dr Baeck, the board backpedalled slightly and replied that, while it could not accept responsibility for this rescue mission, it would not oppose it as the law permitted those with proper papers to enter South Africa.

On the eve of the *Stuttgart's* scheduled arrival in Table Bay, the South African Christian National Socialists, also known as the Greyshirts (Gryshemde), planned a public protest at the harbour. The Greyshirts, a fascist organisation established in October 1933,

was led by Louis Theodor Weichardt, a hairdresser of German descent. Throughout the 1930s, Weichardt and his fellow travellers galvanized support against 'mass' Jewish immigration. So the docking of the *Stuttgart* had to be stopped at all costs. Despite this concerted opposition, on 27 October 1936, three days before new immigration restriction regulations were about to be enforced, 537 German Jews arrived at the Cape Town docks on the specially chartered ship. The ship had arrived the morning after the planned protest. It was a bitterly cold winter's morning, and there were no Greyshirt protesters at the harbour. The *Stuttgart's* captain apparently knew about the protest, and wisely decided to wait a while before docking. The arrival of these over five hundred refugees, predictably, generated hostile letters in the press and mass protest meetings organised by Weichardt and Professor Hendrik Verwoerd of the University of Stellenbosch.

Opposition to Jewish immigration, which had begun in earnest with the 1930 Quota Act, was at the centre of the Greyshirts' political agenda. Weichardt's far-right organisation, which had about 2 000 members at its zenith, was also busy setting up a paramilitary unit modeled on the Nazis' brown-shirted *Sturmabteilung* (SA). It was one of a number of far-right organizations that fought for an end to Jewish immigration. Weichardt's Greyshirts, together with from National Party leaders such as Verwoerd and Malan, ensured that, between 1933 and the start of World War II in 1939, only 6 000 German Jewish refugees entered South Africa. This was a tiny fraction of the quarter of a million German Jews who fled Nazism.[12] Weichardt, like B.J. Vorster, was interned during World War II for his pro-Nazi sympathies. At the end of the war, he joined Oswald Pirow's extreme right-wing *New Order* and, in 1948, he shifted his allegiances to Malan's National Party. It was into this maelstrom of pro-Nazi political mobilisation that my father arrived in Cape Town harbour on board the *Duilio.* To make matters worse, he was soon to relocate to Port Elizabeth, the headquarters of the Greyshirts.

[12] Mendelsohn and Shain, 2008, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History*, p.112.

Louis Theodor Weichardt, the founder of the South African Greyshirt Movement.

The Greyshirt office in Port Elizabeth

(Photographs from Richard Mendelsohn and Milton Shain, 2008, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History*. Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, p.106-7).

FIVE

My eyes open

In February 1990, President F.W. de Klerk declared that his government was about to release Nelson Mandela from prison after twenty-seven years of incarceration and begin negotiations with the ANC. Mass euphoria followed this unexpected announcement. The night before, I had been dancing at a reggae club when, suddenly, ANC activists swept across the dance floor shouting that the following morning Mandela would be giving a speech to the nation from the City Hall balcony at Cape Town's Grand Parade. Although I was about to leave for Zimbabwe to begin two years of rural fieldwork, I could never miss such a momentous event. I delayed my departure, and stood with tens of thousands of frenetic revellers who had gathered to witness Mandela's historical speech on the day of his release. We stood for hours in the scorching sun waiting for him to appear on the City Hall balcony. A few days after these frenzied celebrations, I packed my Toyota bakkie and, together with my partner Julia, began the long journey to Harare.

I had barely settled down in Harare when I received a call from my cousin Cecilia informing me that my father was critically ill. My mother tried to play down the seriousness of the situation. But having heard the urgency in Cecilia's voice, I flew back to Cape Town a few days after the call. My father was in good spirits despite the hopeless cancer prognosis. He had come to terms with his diagnosis. "It's enough already. It's time to go", he told me. He was in good spirits, and I spent ten precious days with him before returning to Zimbabwe. Upon my arrival in Harare, Julia and I drove southwards to Bulawayo before making my way to my fieldwork site in Matabeleland South Province. A few months later I received news from home that my father's condition was critical. I flew back to Cape Town and arrived at his hospital bed just in time to say goodbye. He was heavily sedated on morphine. I was sure he could hear me as I stroked his head. As his life ebbed away, his eyes stared into mine. It was as if he was trying to tell me something vitally important. The nurse saw me stroking him and remarked, "They still have feeling, even after the pulse stops." There was so much more I would have wanted to ask him. There was so much that was left unsaid.

***

SR (far left) at the homestead of the late Mr. F. Sibanda (seated), Sengezane village, Gwanda District, Matabeleland South Province, Zimbabwe, c. 1991.

From 1990 to 1992, I lived in Sengezane village. It was my first experience of long-term rural fieldwork. I had to learn to cope with unbearably hot lowveld summers, scorpions and snakes, as well as everyday life without electricity, running water. I also had to learn to live without privacy. I was unprepared for the constant observation and surveillance of my every move by local residents. I can vividly recall the good-natured laughter and playful banter of villagers observing my dashes to the pit drop latrine after my first encounter with rather uncooked traditionally brewed beer. For a nice Jewish boy from the middle-class suburbs of Port Elizabeth, these kinds of fieldwork experiences were a rude awakening to the rigours of daily life on the rural periphery.

I had decided to do research in Zimbabwe because I naively believed that the country's land reform programme was democratic, socialist and progressive. I also thought that Zimbabwe's democratic transition could have positive implications for a future post-apartheid South Africa. Only a couple of months into my fieldwork, I discovered that things were not quite what they seemed. I also learnt from villagers that the traumatic memories of state terror in Matabeleland in the early 1980s had persisted into the present. Villagers vividly recollected how, in the early 1980s, shortly after independence, an estimated 20 000 Ndebele-speaking so-called political dissidents had been killed by President Robert Mugabe's North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade soldiers. Doing fieldwork in Matabeleland in the early 1990s was an antidote to my idealism.

I had arrived in Sengezane village in 1990 with romantic visions of Zimbabwe's brand of African socialism. I fervently believed that this postcolonial state had successfully redistributed land to millions of landless peasants. I left Zimbabwe in December 1993

thoroughly disillusioned by the grim realities of state corruption, authoritarianism and political repression. By contrast, the early 1990s were times of great hope in South Africa: Mandela and all the other political prisoners were released, the liberation movements were unbanned, and the negotiation process between President de Klerk's National Party and the ANC leadership had begun in earnest. Despite a string of bombings by the far right-wing and the Azanian Peoples Organisation's military wing, as well as bloody battles between Zulu cultural nationalists of Inkatha and ANC comrades, the first democratic elections took place peacefully in April 1994 with millions of black South Africans voting for the first time in their lives. The ANC was swept into power and Mandela became president. By the time I had completed my doctoral dissertation in 1995, I was desperate to return to this dynamic and promising new democracy with Mandela at the helm. I turned my back on Robert Mugabe's tyrannical regime and headed south. Home was calling.

My first job upon returning to South Africa in 1995, after having completed my doctorate, was as a researcher with the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies at UCT. The research involved interviewing South African Jews on their sense of belonging and identity at the time of the transition to democracy. But I was deeply ambivalent about this research project. I had spent the past decade or more running away from my own Jewish identity. So how was I going to research this discomforting topic? But I was taken by surprise. The interviews catalysed a revitalized interest in my repressed Jewish identity. I began to reclaim an identity that I had kept under wraps since my high-school days. The interviews also included speaking to Jewish radicals who had joined the ANC and Communist Party, and who were now returning triumphantly to the new South Africa, after decades of exile in London, Maputo, Dar es Salaam, and Lusaka. I interviewed feisty Jewish trade unionists and communist stalwarts such as Ray Alexander who had fought courageous battles on the factory floors and come out on the winning side. After having been ignored and avoided by the mainstream Jewish community during apartheid, these Jewish radicals were now being wined and dined by a conservative Jewish establishment anxious to appropriate them as their own in these new democratic times. But this could not sweep away the fact that most Jews had been bystanders during the heat of the struggle against apartheid, and a few had openly collaborated with the apartheid state. The most notorious of these collaborators was Percy Yutar, the first Jewish attorney-general in apartheid South Africa, who zealously secured Mandela's conviction of life imprisonment on Robben Island. I also interviewed Jews on the social margins, for instance, gay and lesbian Jewish activists who challenged mainstream Judaism in their quest for sexual equality and social and religious acceptance.

After six months of interviewing Jews across the political spectrum, my submerged Jewishness began to steadily rise to the surface.

In 1995, I left UCT's Kaplan Centre and joined the Department of Anthropology at the University of the Western Cape. A year later I was researching the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and writing articles and editorials about this extraordinary process in the press. During the mid-1990s, I attended numerous TRC public hearings at which I was exposed to the emotionally raw testimonies of victims of political violence. I also heard relatives of anti-apartheid activists who had been killed by the apartheid security forces demand the bodily remains of their loved ones. They also wanted to know exactly what happened to these murdered activists. Soon I began asking similar questions about my father's family. It was not long before I began getting some answers.

***

In 1996, while attending an American Anthropology Association conference in Washington DC, I took time out from sessions to visit the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. Walking past exhibits of massive piles of shoes, spectacles and suitcases from the death camps shocked and unsettled me. Other exhibits revealed the complicity of big business and science, and physical anthropology in particular, in the genocide. One of these exhibits referred to the German anatomist and physical anthropologist, Dr Eugen Fischer, a Nazi scientist whose footprint I would stumble across again, many years later. Fischer's scientific work had led directly to Nazi policy decisions such as racial classification, which created the conditions for the mass murder of Roma, Sinti and Jews. Another German scientist who featured in the exhibition was the German psychiatrist and physician Robert Ritter, the man who wrote a report that led the Reich Interior Ministry to issue guidelines in 1936 entitled "On Combatting the Gypsy Plague". In 1936, Ritter was appointed to head the newly created Eugenic and Population Biological Research Station of the Reich Health and Sanitation Office. By 1941, Ritter's research and policy guidelines mandated the photographic surveillance and finger printing of Roma, thus setting in motion processes of extermination. I also learnt about Operation T4 (the Nazi euthanasia programme), the use of slave labour from the camps by the Bavarian Motor Works (BMW), the role of IBM in Nazi racial classification systems, and the fact that more than half of the participants at the Wannsee Conference that decided on the Final Solution had doctoral degrees. German scientists and engineers had volunteered their expertise for the design and construction of the machinery of mass murder.

Mieczyslav Stobierski's model of Crematorium II-Auschwitz Birkenau made this modern, industrial-scale mass killing machine more concrete. Stobierski's model reconstruction of the gas chambers contained small clay figures sculptured with frightening realism. Staring at this model of Auschwitz's death chambers I found myself trying to imagine the screaming and terror as the gas was released. Did the victims know what was about to happen to them? They must have first stood naked in front of Mengele and his selection team, and then they were sent to this terrifying death. German scientists and the corporate businessmen of IBM and pharmaceuticals and chemicals company I.G. Farben were the capitalist cogs in this catastrophe. This cast of characters, along with Eichmann, Heydrich and countless other Nazis officers and foot soldiers, set in motion a sequence of mundane, bureaucratic steps – racial classification, ordinances that stripped Jews of citizenship, confiscation of property, slave labour, deportation, selection - that culminated in the murder of my father's family.

Wandering through the exhibition left me in a state of stupefaction. I eventually stumbled upon the museum's library and resource centre. I needed to speak to someone, so I walked across to one of the museum staff. I told him about the disorientating effect the exhibition had on me. I also told him that my father's family had perished in the Holocaust. He asked for my family name, and then took out a bulky black book called the *Berliner Gedenkbuch.* The full title of this book was "The Memorial Book of the Federal Archives for the Victims of the Persecution of Jews in Germany (1933-1945)". Paging through it slowly and with purpose, the librarian came to the pages with surnames that began with the letter R: Reich, Rosen, Rubinstein… He stopped at the list of the names of six Robinski family members – Cecilie, David, Edith, Edith (Siegfried's wife), Siegfried and Hildegard. Next to their names were their addresses in Berlin, dates and places of birth, and dates and places of deportation. I learnt at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. that the first to be deported were my grandparents on the 21st Transport to Riga on the 19th October 1942, then Hildegard was deported on the 19th February 1943 and, shortly thereafter, on the 1st March 1943, they sent my uncle Siegfried to Auschwitz on the 31st Transport. His sister Edith was deported to Auschwitz five months later.

I felt like a detective stumbling across the first hard evidence that tied the murderer to the crime scene. It was the first written evidence I had come across about what had happened to my family. What had once been vague and abstract knowledge now took on a concreteness and facticity; it felt much like those moments when top secret information of security police atrocities were unearthed by TRC investigators, and eventually became part

of the officially sanctioned archive of apartheid crimes against humanity. A strong feeling of satisfaction and relief came over me. The librarian gave me a puzzled look; he probably could not fathom why a relative would seem so satisfied at discovering the horrific details of his family's fate in Auschwitz and Riga? Should their expression not be one of shock and sorrow? But I had my own reasons for feeling so gratified. What I had found that day had satisfied a deep yearning for official confirmation of what had happened. The terrifyingly mundane, bureaucratic details about their deportation dates and destinations meant that the fate of my father's family had not been completely erased off the face of this earth. The preface of the book by the then Federal President of Germany Horst Kohler came close to capturing what I was experiencing: "This Memorial Book gives those murdered their names and dignity back. It is a memorial and at the same time a reminder that every single life has a name and its own truly unique tragic story." I sensed that this new information from the *Berliner Gedenkbuch* would forever change my life, but I could never have imagined where it would lead me. As I walked out of the museum I was acutely aware that I carried with me knowledge that had been buried for decades in the black hole of silence in my father's house in Port Elizabeth. That silence had finally been broken.

Walking away from the museum I wondered how my father would have responded to this exhibition. Did he ever go to Holocaust museums, exhibitions and films? In the days after my visit to the museum, I struggled with unsettling questions about my personal relationship to this devastating past. To what degree was it my past too, or was I intruding upon, and perhaps even cannibalising, my father's memories and experiences? I tried fathom why he had been so silent. Yet, how could I have expected him to have spoken about this when he himself probably knew very little about what had actually happened, apart from the few lines in the Red Cross notices sent after the war. Only years later, would I gain insights into why he was silent about what had happened.

After the Washington D.C. visit, I flew to New York, en route to Berlin. On 17 December 1996, while sipping coffee in one of downtown Manhattan's numerous Starbucks restaurants, I found myself once again reflecting on the meaning of my raw and bewildering visit to the Holocaust Memorial Museum. I was about to visit Berlin and anticipating new revelations. Sitting in this East Village coffee shop with Motown music playing softly in the background, I realised that the museum visit had opened a portal into my family's past that I may never to able to close. It seemed I had no choice but to cautiously peer into this black hole of silence. The next stop would be Berlin, the quintessential city of ghosts. But did the ghosts even want visitors? Would my father have approved of what I was doing, or would

he have implored me to firmly close the lid of this dreaded black box? These disconcerting thoughts raced through my mind as I contemplated what lay ahead of me.

When I met the Jewish anthropologist Jonathan Boyarin at a Greenwich Village coffee shop a few days later, he immediately launched into a tirade against Daniel Goldhagen's recently published book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust.*[13] Goldhagen had made sweeping claims about Germans' innate hatred of Jews. He held all Germans accountable, not just card-carrying Nazis and the SS. For Goldhagen, the vast majority of ordinary Germans were "willing executioners" in the Holocaust because of a unique and virulent "eliminationist anti-Semitism" that was deeply embedded within German political culture and identity. This blind hatred of Jews, he insisted, surfaced in the religious ideas of medieval Europe and had, over the centuries, morphed into its twentieth century secular forms. Goldhagen's argument challenged the American historian Christopher Browning's 1992 book *Ordinary Men*, which was about the Reserve Police Battalion 101 which had been used in 1942 to massacre and round up Jews for deportation to the death camps in Poland. Browning's startling conclusion, which was strongly influenced by the famous Milgram experiment on compliance, was that the men of Unit 101 were not fanatical anti-Semites but ordinary middle-aged, working-class men from Hamburg, who had been drafted but found to be unfit for military action. Goldhagen insisted that Browning had got it all wrong, and that these massacres of Jews were not the outcome of the ordinary sociological phenomenon of compliance to authority, but instead these men of Unit 101 were ordinary members of an extraordinarily barbaric German political culture that promoted an irrational, genocidal hatred of Jews.

Debate raged in Germany and the United States. The book became a publishing phenomenon, even though it received scathing reviews from most historians. In the words of the illustrious Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg, the book was "totally wrong about everything" and "worthless". Jonathan Boyarin agreed with Hilberg, insisting that there was nothing unique and exceptional about German political culture or personality that predisposed Germans towards genocidal anti-Semitism. He dismissed Goldhagen's book as an ahistorical and essentialist tract. Before I could become too caught up in these contentious historical and philosophical debates, I flew out of New York bound for Berlin. A day later, leaving behind all this intellectual heat and fury, I found myself trawling through bureaucratic records and documents in Berlin's archives. I had no idea then where these

[13] Daniel Goldhagen, 1996. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust.* Alfred A. Knopf Publishers.

searches for traces of my family's past would take me. One thing I did sense, however, was that there was no way back. The past was beckoning.

My visit to Berlin's Landesarvhiv revealed to me how user-friendly Berlin's archives could be for Jewish visitors who arrive there in search of information about relatives. As I arrived an affable librarian came across to me. She instantly assessed exactly what I wanted. She asked for the family name that I was interested in, and went off to search through the files. About twenty minutes later she came back with photocopies of about one hundred pages of official documentation about the last days of the Robinski family. I now had a thick file with information, but I could not read the German documents. To this day I have only translated a small fraction of the hundred pages from the Robinski file.

Paging through this thick file on the Robinski family, I came face-to-face with the bureaucratic rationality of the Nazi regime, what Hannah Arendt referred to as the banality of evil. Everything was systematically documented, including the exact details of the value of the Robinski's confiscated property. From having nothing but a single postcard-size photograph of Edith, her sister and her mother, I now had in my hands all sorts of official records, tax certificates and deportation documents. I could now begin the process of trying to string together these bare bureaucratic facts.

At the Landesarchiv I also discovered that, one month after his deportation, Siegfried's and his wife's meagre personal belongings were meticulously recorded and evaluated by officials in an inventory:

Zur Beachtung! 45/26555 Akt.-Z. d. OFP lt. Straßenliste Erm. 3043

Zwischen dem Oberfinanzpräsidenten Berlin-Brandenburg und dem Oberbürgermeister der Reichshauptstadt Berlin ist vereinbart worden, daß bei der Bewertung der zu schätzenden Sachen ein vernünftiger mittlerer Preis auf der Grundlage des Vorkriegspreisniveaus, und zwar unter Berücksichtigung des allgemeinen Vorkriegsverkehrswertes der Sachen gelten soll.

Schätzungsblatt Nr. 1

(Gehören zu einer Wohnung mehrere Schätzungsblätter, so sind diese laufend zu numerieren.)

Berlin- S.O.36 Straße: Naunystr. Nr. 46 Lage: v. IV.

Früherer Mieter bzw. Untermieter: (Früherer Eigentümer der Gegenstände) Robinski, Siegfried u. Edith

Beinerz, b. III.

Ungeziefert — Nicht ungezieferfrei!

Schlüssel sind abgegeben bei:

Sonderauftrag

Inventar und Bewertung

Jeden Raum gesondert aufführen und mit Überschrift versehen (z. B. Schlafzimmer). Nur zusammengehörige Sachen gemeinsam bewerten. — Kleinigkeiten als Sammelposten aufführen.

Ld. Nr.	Stück	Gegenstand	Nähere Kennzeichnung	Bewertung in RM	Bemerkungen
1	1	Metallbettstelle m. Aufl.		20.-	
2	1	Ruhebett	wertlos		
3		Betten		25.-	
4	1	Kleiderschrank		20.-	
5	1	Pilztisch)			
6	4	Stühle)		5.-	
7	2	Korbtische)			
8	2	Korbstühle)		10.-	
9	1	Lampe		20.-	
10	2	Regale		1[illegible].-	
11		Gardinen		10.-	
12	2	Bettstellen		15.-	
13	1	Kücheneinrichtung	5 teilig	35.-	
14		Küchengeschirr u. Hausrat		10.-	
				205.-	
			Schätzungskosten	7.-	
				212.-	
		Kostenrechnung:			
		Taxgebühr	5.- RM.		
		Schreibgebühr 4 S.	1.- "		
		Fuhrkosten	1.- "		
			7.- "		

Berlin, den 3. April 1943

Gewissenhaft aufgenommen und bewertet.

Geschätzt auf 205 RM.

ab 10 % 20.50

bleiben 184.50 RM.

Gerichtsvollzieher.

zu übertragen Seitensumme: RM

HWI 342a. Mat. 12086a. Din A 4. 8000. 2. 43

Inventory and evaluation, Naunystraße 46, Berlin, Apartment Siegfried und Edith Robinski, 3 April 1943

Special order: Inventory and evaluation

List every room separately and with heading (e.g. "bedroom"). Only related things can be evaluated together – small things have to be listed under collective items

page 1

1 metal bed base with mattress	value: 20 Reichsmark (RM)
1 day bed	no value
beds	25RM
1 wardrobe	20RM
1 small table and 4 chairs	30RM
2 wicker tables and 2 wicker chairs	10RM
1 Lamp	20RM
2 Shelves	10RM
Curtains	10RM
2 bed bases	15RM
1 Kitchen furniture, 6 pieces	35RM
cooking vessels and other household utensils	10RM
	205RM
cost of evaluation	7RM
	212RM
cost calculation:	
tax fee:	5
writing fee for 4 pages:	1
travelling expenses:	1
total:	7

Berlin, 3rd April 1943

thoroughly and conscientiously evaluated.

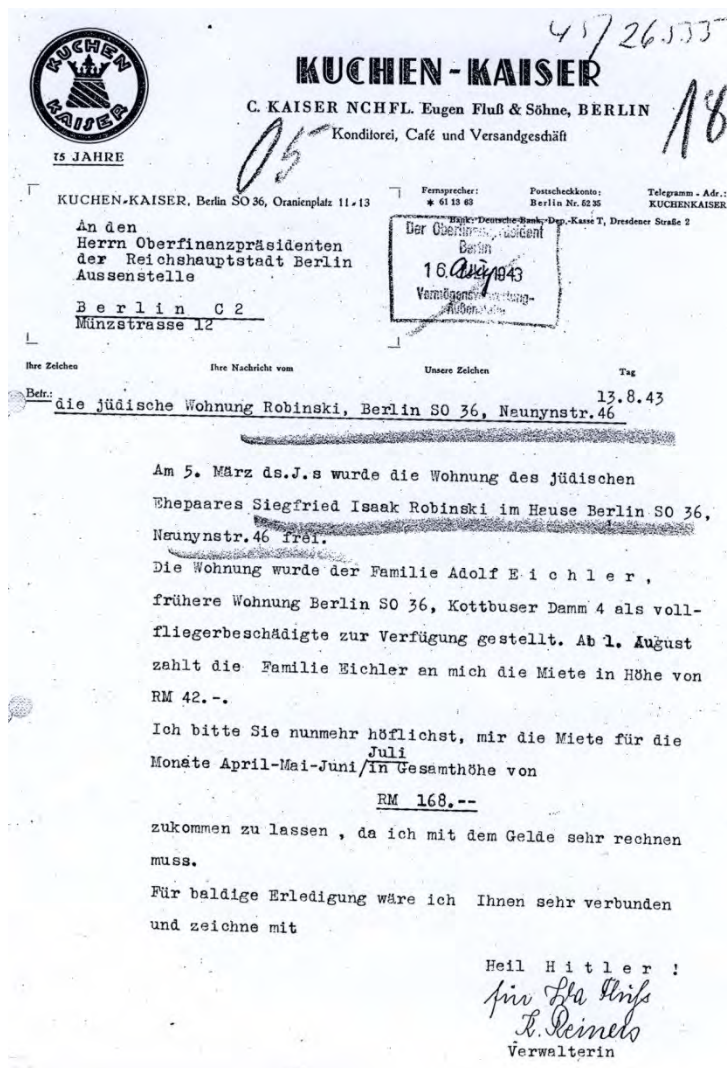
estimated at	205RM
off 10%	20,50RM
remaining	184,50RM

The Bailor.

(signed)

This inventory list tells us much about the perversity of the Nazi bureaucracy, but very little about its victims. Whereas their curtains are evaluated at 10RM, Siegfried and his wife are given no value in this audit; they are soon to be reduced to ashes. From this inventory I was able to learn of the value that officials attributed to their meagre possessions: a wardrobe, a lamp, shelves, tables, beds, kitchen furniture, cooking pots, utensils, and chairs.

In the thick Robinski file that I was given at the Berlin Landesarchiv I came across a letter that was sent on 13 August 1943 to the Finance President of the Berlin Municipality on behalf of Herr. Eugen Flusss, the owner of Kuchen Kaiser Café and the apartment that was occupied by Siegfried and Edith Robinski before they were deported. Their apartment had been allocated to the family of Adolf Eichler as compensation for his war injuries but rental had not been paid for four months and the letter requests immediate settlement of the outstanding 168 Reichmark. I now had in my possession over a hundred pages of documentation testifying to bureaucratic procedures that ultimately led to the deportations.



KUCHEN-KAISER

C. KAISER NCHFL. Eugen Fluß & Söhne, BERLIN

Konditorei, Café und Versandgeschäft

15 JAHRE

KUCHEN-KAISER, Berlin SO 36, Oranienplatz 11-13

Fernsprecher: 61 13 63 Postscheckkonto: Berlin Nr. 8235 Telegramm-Adr.: KUCHENKAISER

Bank: Deutsche Bank, Dep.-Kasse T, Dresdener Straße 2

An den
Herrn Oberfinanzpräsidenten
der Reichshauptstadt Berlin
Aussenstelle

Berlin C 2
Münzstrasse 12

Der Oberfinanzpräsident Berlin
16. Aug. 1943
Vermögensverwertung-Außenstelle

Ihre Zeichen | Ihre Nachricht vom | Unsere Zeichen | Tag 13.8.43

Betr.: die jüdische Wohnung Robinski, Berlin SO 36, Neunynstr. 46

Am 5. März ds.J.s wurde die Wohnung des jüdischen Ehepaares Siegfried Isaak Robinski im Hause Berlin SO 36, Neunynstr. 46 frei.

Die Wohnung wurde der Familie Adolf Eichler, frühere Wohnung Berlin SO 36, Kottbuser Damm 4 als voll-fliegerbeschädigte zur Verfügung gestellt. Ab 1. August zahlt die Familie Eichler an mich die Miete in Höhe von RM 42.-.

Ich bitte Sie nunmehr höflichst, mir die Miete für die Monate April-Mai-Juni/Juli in Gesamthöhe von

RM 168.--

zukommen zu lassen, da ich mit dem Gelde sehr rechnen muss.

Für baldige Erledigung wäre ich Ihnen sehr verbunden und zeichne mit

Heil Hitler!

für Eugen Fluß
K. Reinelt
Verwalterin

The Berlin Landesarchiv documents also reveal that Siegfried, together with his sister Edith, had been working as a slave labourer (Zwangsarbeit) at Zeiss Ikon in Berlin-Zehlendorf until 27 February 1943, when Siegfried was arrested by the Gestapo. At the time, the Zeis Ikon factory was manufacturing lenses for military equipment for the war effort. Siegfried was deported to Auschwitz on the 1 March, 1943, a day after the notorious Fabriek Aktion, when Jewish slave labourers were replaced with prisoners of war and deported to the East. Edith went underground on that day, or a few days later. She was arrested five months later by the Gestapo on 29 July 1943 and held in detention at the Jewish Senior Centre (das judische Altersheim) at Grose Hamburger Str. 26. On 4 August 1943 she was deported on the 40th Transport to Auschwitz. My father's other sister Hildegard had been deported to Auschwitz a few months earlier, on the 13 February, 1943. A "Proof of delivery" document from Berlin's Landesarchiv records that Hildegard was "delivered" to the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin on 17 February 1943; she had been working as a slave labourer in a laundry company called Max Burmann & Co at Herzbergstr 68-70 when she was arrested. Two days later she was deported to Auschwitz:

Proof of delivery
One copy of the attached document on behalf of the Gestapo, Gestapo headquarters Berlin, for the purpose of delivery of
Hildegard Sara Robinski
I handed over today to the recipient himself at Berlin N 4, Grosse Hamburger Street,
Berlin … 17.Feb.1943
Chief Executor in Berlin

Documents collected from various archives in Washington D.C. and Berlin testified to the bureaucratically driven murder of David and Cecelie Robinski. It began with the declaration of property (vermogenserklaring) on the 16 October 1942, and concluded with their deportation to Riga three days later. I later found a document revealing that on 8 February 1955, shortly before his marriage, my father had received a letter from Berlin informing him that his parents had been deported to Riga on 21 Ost [Eastern] Transport on 19 October 1942. He probably already knew that they had been deported to the East but now he had confirmation of the precise dates and destination.

Der Treuhänder
der
Amerikanischen, Britischen und Französischen Militärregierung
für zwangsübertragene Vermögen

① Berlin W 30, den 21. Februar 1955 Si
Nürnberger Straße 53/55
Fernsprecher: 24 00 11, App. 381

Aktz.: O 5205 34 / 19580

Name: Robinski, David und Cäcilie

An
Herrn H.L. R o b i n s
18/20 Ackermanns Bldgs.
~~Rotbox~~ Main Street
Port Elizabeth /Südafrika

Auf Ihren Antrag vom 8.Februar 1955 Geschäftsnummer: ---
wird hierdurch bescheinigt, daß nach den Akten bezw. Unterlagen des früheren Oberfinanz-präsidenten Berlin-Brandenburg

Herr — ~~Frau~~ David R o b i n s k i ,
geb. am 16.5.1878 in Rucken Tilsit
zuletzt wohnhaft in Berlin- C 2, Wallnertheater Str.45
und seine Ehefrau Cäcilie , geborene Grünberg
geb. am 24. 11. 1882 in Grondzaw
zuletzt wohnhaft ebenda, ~~sowie ihre — seine Kinder~~

1. ……, geb. am …… in ……,
zuletzt wohnhaft ebenda,

2. ……, geb. am …… in ……,
zuletzt wohnhaft ebenda,

mit dem 21. Ost - Transport vom 19.10.1942
nach Ziel unbekannt deportiert worden ~~ist~~ — sind.
Der weitere Verbleib ~~des~~ — der Genannten ist hier leider nicht festzustellen.

Im Auftrag

Dr. Grewolds

***

On the left is the Kuchen Kaiser Café. It is in the same building as Siegfried and Edith Robinski's apartment in Naunynstrase 46, Kreuzberg (Wolfe Harris 2014)

A few days after my discoveries in the Berlin Landesarchiv, I had another encounter with the material traces of my father's family in Berlin. It was on a bitterly cold winter's night in December 1996, when the German historian Jan-Georg Deutch and I set out to try to locate Naunynstrase 46 in Kreuzberg where my father's older brother Siegfried had lived with his wife Edith prior to their deportation. Siegfried and Edith's building was in a part of Berlin that had miraculously survived the bombings intact. That winter night in December 1996, I came face to face with material remains of the world they had once inhabited. I now had a brick-and-mortar structure where my father's brother and his wife had once lived. Berlin was becoming for me more than a repository of bureaucratic facts and paper trails.

During a later visit to Naunynstrase 46, I met Herr Hans-Ulrich Fluss, the son of Siegfried's landlord and the former owner of the Kuchen Kaiser bakery. Both the bakery and the apartment building had been owned by the Fluss family since the early decades of the last century. Siegfried and his wife rented the small garden flat in the courtyard of the building. Because they were seen to be poor Eastern European Jews from "Silesia" (Poland), they were given the cheaper and smaller accommodation. Fluss insisted that he had no documentary evidence of their stay in his father's building. He had tried to arrange a meeting for me with an elderly woman who lived in the building in the 1930s and 1940s, but she said she remembered absolutely nothing about Siegfried and Edith and refused to meet with me. Herr Fluss also showed me hundreds of photographs taken onto Oranienplatz from his living room window. These photographs of the square included worker protests, Nazi rallies, Kurdish religious ceremonies, squatter demonstrations and protests by Kreuzberg anarchists, Marxists, and ethnic and religious minorities.

Herr Fluss told me that his father had Jewish employees at his Kuchen Kaiser bakery, and that he had assisted some of them to escape to South America. His father was apparently a card-carrying member of the Nazi Party, and he used his Spanish fascist contacts to help them flee Germany. Fluss Jnr. said his father had also assisted a wealthy

Jewish business associate and that this rescue mission had involved a sizeable financial transaction. Given Siegfried and Edith's poor financial state, Fluss Sr. was unlikely to have considered going out of his way to help them. Herr Fluss portrayed his father as an enterprising and opportunistic man. The son said that his father had to obtain a family genealogy and certificate of descent to prove his pure Aryan ancestry because he had a large nose and "looked Jewish". Fluss Sr. wanted to join the Nazi Party so he had to prove beyond all doubt that he was of pure Aryan stock. By joining the Nazi Party, Herr Fluss Sr. got access to government contracts. Proof of racial purity and Nazi party membership were a sure ticket to lucrative tenders.

I later learnt that staff members at Eugen Fischer's Berlin-based Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics routinely investigated such descent claims, and submitted "genetic and race science certificates of descent" to the Reich Ancestry Office in the Reich Ministry of the Interior. With the passing of the "Aryan Clause" in the Law for the Restoration of Career Civil Service of 1933 and the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, the proof of descent became even more important.[14] There was the Small Certificate of Descent that went back to the grandparents, and the Large Certificate of Descent which traced ancestors to 1800. Herr Fluss Sr. must have managed to obtain the latter even though his son told me that his father was convinced that there was "Jewish blood" in the family. Fischer's scientific footprint was once again in the picture, and it wasn't about to disappear either.

1930s map of the area near Wallner-Theaterstraße in Berlin-Mitte where the Robinskis lived from 1920.

Having found the intact Kreuzberg building where Siegfried and his wife lived, Jan-George Deutch and I now turned our attention to my grandparents. Jan-George found a 1930s telephone book and map of Berlin which he used to locate the building that my grandparents and Edith and Hildegard had occupied in Wallner-Theaterstraße 45 in Berlin-

[14] See Hans-Walter Schmuhl, 2008. *The Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics, 1927-1945: Crossing Boundaries.* p.235.

Mitte. But, as he suspected, the building had been completely flattened by Allied bombs. After the war, virtually all buildings in Mitte that had been damaged by the carpet bombing were razed to the ground and replaced with modern, high-rise apartment buildings. On that icy winter's night, Jan-Georg and I wandered through a maze of these high-rise buildings trying to locate where Wallner-Theaterstraße 45 must have once been. We didn't manage to identify the spot with any degree of certainty. It was disorienting walking amongst these identical high-rise buildings, called Plattenbau. Made from prefabricated concrete slabs, and considered to be a typically East German style of high modernist architecture, Plattenbau were constructed throughout East Germany in the 1960s. Surrounded by these towering Plattanbau structures, we came up against the systematic erasure of the Robinski family's presence from Berlin's urban landscape.

A few days later, on 30 December 1996, I met Klaus, a Berlin-based architect who had lived in Cape Town for a number of years. We did not discuss the former East Berlin's socialist architecture. Instead, Klaus raged for an hour about Germany's Holocaust memory culture and its unhealthy obsession with the dozen year reign of the Third Reich. He also railed against Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* for implying that Germans were almost genetically predisposed to genocidal anti-Semitism. Klaus wanted contemporary Germany to become a more future-oriented society. He denounced the excessive and morbid pre-occupation with what he referred to as a short, catastrophic aberration in the country's long and illustrious history. Berlin must not be forever trapped in this brief and disastrous Nazi era, he insisted. A few days after my intense, and exhausting, encounter with Klaus, I returned to South Africa. Although I returned with new facts about my father's family in Berlin, I still knew very little about their daily lives, their fears, desires and dreams. There were still glaring gaps and stony silences.

***

Cecilie and David Robinski, Berlin 1938

Shortly after returning from Berlin, I wrote an essay entitled "Silence in My Father's House".[15] The essay examined questions of violence, loss, memory and identity in relation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, indigenous land claims and my recent searches for traces of my father's past in Berlin. Having decided to use the haunting photograph of Edith, her mother and sister in the essay, I took it to the publisher's office to be scanned. When I opened the small metal frame I discovered that at the back of the photograph was a date written in neat Gothic script: 20/12 1937. Next to this, in black print, was further information about the production of the photograph: Photogr. Atelier, SELMAN BERLIN, KONIGSTRASSE im Wertheimhaus. Then came the startling revelation: concealed behind the portrait of my grandmother and her two daughters was another postcard-size photograph that I had never seen before. It was of my grandfather David and his wife Cecilie. In the same tidy hand written script it was neatly inscribed: Berlin 10.II. 38. The name of the photographer and the name and address of the photographic studio were also identical. This uncanny gift from my ancestors was the only photographic portrait of my grandfather. My grandmother's hair looks greyer and older and wearier than in the photograph taken only a couple of months earlier. These two photographs must have been sent to my father in Port Elizabeth by his family in Berlin. Or, perhaps Artur brought it out when he came to South Africa in 1938. My father was most likely unaware that hidden behind the photograph of his mother and sisters was a portrait of his parents. This would explain why there was only one photograph on display in our Port Elizabeth home – the one of the three sombre women with no names or histories.

[15] See Robins, 1998 "Silence in My Father's House: Memory, Nationalism and Narratives of the Body", in Carli Coetzee & Sarah Nuttal, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp.120-142.

SIX
Stumbling Stones

Solpersteine outside Siegfried and Edith Robinski's building in Kreuzberg, Berlin

In 1998 I was a visiting scholar for three months at Humboldt University Law School near Unter den Linden Strasse in Berlin. Professor Gerhard Werle from Humboldt's Law School had given me an office in his department. The office looked directly onto Bebelplatz Square where, on 10th May 1933, the Nazis burnt 'unGerman' books by authors such as Thomas and Klaus Mann, Heinrich Heine, Rosa Luxemburg, Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx. At the centre of the square is a glass plate embedded in the pavement. Peering down this glass sheet one gets a view into a subterranean room full of empty bookshelves. This art work by the Israeli artist Micha Ullman is called "Library", and has bookshelves that can accommodate about 20 000 books, the estimated number of books burnt by the Nazis in May 1933. Next to the glass plate are two bronze plaques, including the famous Heinrich Heine quote:

> *That was only a prelude,*
> *There where they burn books,*
> *they burn in the end people.*
> *Heinrich Heine 1820*

Bebelplatz Square where the Nazis held their first book burning on the 10th May 1933. Among the books torched were texts by Thomas Mann, Heinrich Heine and Karl Marx. My office looked directly onto the square.

I was mesmerized by Berlin's spectral urbanscape. Virtually every step I took I stumbled upon traces of the past. The city was swamped by memorials, monuments, museums, plaques, memory artworks and installations, and old buildings with tragic and terrifying histories. I can recall walking through the streets of Kreuzberg district and seeing numerous brass plaques nested in the paving stones at the entrance of buildings; engraved on the plaques were names and dates of destinations. Martin Duspohl, the director the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Museum, told me that these Stolpersteine (Stumbling Stones) were made by the Cologne-based artist Gunter Demnig. Without seeking permission from municipal authorities, Demnig had clandestinely placed dozens of these commemorative plaques in public places in Kreuzberg. In 1996, as part of the project "Artists search for Auschwitz", he had placed fifty of these Stolpersteine at the entrances of buildings in Oranienstrasse (Kreuzberg) from which Jews were deported.

With Martin's help, I met the artist, and a few days later we began the lengthy bureaucratic process of trying to get official permission to place two of these brass plaques in front of the Kreuzberg building that Siegfried and Edith were deported from. We had to get the support of the district assembly, the Kreuzberg Commemorative Plaque Commission, city council members and the mayor. We also had to overcome stiff opposition from the public works department, which was dead against the Stolpersteine project because Demnig's first fifty stones had been laid illegally. After many meetings and much paperwork, we were finally given the official go ahead to place the two Stolpersteine outside Siegfried and Edith's building.

Photograph of the Stolpersteine for Siegfried and Edith Robinski in Kreuzberg (Wolfe Harris, 2014)

These days, the Stolpersteine commemorative project is quite formalised. The process typically begins with research by school learners, youth groups, relatives and neighbourhood organisations, often relying on the Yad Vashem database in Jerusalem. Demnig then manufactures a concrete cube of 10 X 10 cm (4 inches), which he covers with a sheet of brass upon which he inscribes the details of the individual victim of the Nazis. It starts with: "Hier

wohnte" ("Here Lived") and then provides the name, date and place of death of an individual killed by the Nazis. The plaque is then laid flush with the pavement or sidewalk in front of the last chosen residence of the victim.

Demnig mostly uses these plaques to commemorate Jewish victims, but he has also included Roma, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, black people, Christians opposed to the Nazis, communists, military deserters and resistance fighters, and the physically and mentally disabled. In May 2004, six stumbling stones were laid for patients who had been murdered as a result of Nazi euthanasia programmes at Berlin's Municipal Mental Hospital for Children. Nine years later, on 7 June 2013, the 5,000th stumbling stone was dedicated in Berlin's Reinickendorf District to Paul Hohlmann, a victim of the Nazi's children's euthanasia programmes. Paul, a 14-year old boy who had been diagnosed by doctors with "mongolism" and "idiocy", died in August 1942 after medical experiments have been conducted on him and doctors had denied him medical care because of his "developmental disorder". I was to later discover that my own discipline of anthropology was intimately involved in these Nazi euthanasia and eugenics programmes.

Some believe that the idea of the Stolpersteine comes from the period before the Shoah when it was the custom in Germany for non-Jews to say, whenever they stumbled over a protruding stone: "There must be a Jew buried here."[16] The official Stolpersteine website traces the concept to 16 December 1992, the day that marked the 50 years since Heinrich Himmler signed a decree to deport Cologne's Roma and Sinti to death camps. Demnig commemorated this day by engraving the decree's first sentence onto a stone which was laid in front of Cologne's Town Hall. At the time there were contentious public debates about granting Roma from the former Yugoslavia the right of residence in Germany. Around this time, Demnig also met a Cologne resident who insisted with absolute conviction that no Roma or Sinti had ever lived in her neighbourhood. This denial prompted Demnig to conceive of the Stolperstein as a symbolic return of Nazi victims to their neighbourhood, and to their last place residence. In 1994 he laid 250 of these concrete blocks for murdered Roma and Sinti into the pavements of Cologne. This was followed by fifty Stolpersteine in Berlin two years later. A decade later there were the tens of thousands of these plaques throughout Germany and European cities.

[16] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stolperstein

Stolpersteine ceremony that took place in 2000 outside Siegfried and Edith Robinski's last residence in Naunynstrase 45, Kreuzberg; on the left is the author, in the centre is Gunter Demnig and on the right is Kreuzberg Councillor Minz.

Demnig comes across as a quirky character in his Stetson and leather waistcoat. He insists on both making and installing the plaques himself, even though this inevitably slows down the process considerably. He insists that he doesn't want the process to become a factory production line. Even though he knows that he can never make millions of stumbling stones to commemorate all of the Nazis' victims, he believes that if his brass plaques can inspire discussions about the memory of some of these victims, then he's achieved something. "The stones prevent forgetting. They bring back the name of each individual victim," he says. He sees the stones as a way of remembering people whose rights and dignity were systematically stripped away until they were taken to "Jew houses" before being deported or forced to leave the country of their birth.[17] Remembering the individual names is at the heart of this commemoration practice. These stones can create spaces of memory for those, like my father's family, who don't have gravestones. The purpose is to also get the current residents in the buildings next to the Stolpersteine to think about and remember what happened to individuals who once lived in their neighbourhood.

Demnig courts controversy. He provoked contentious debates in 1990 when he marked in chalk the route taken by Cologne's Roma and Sinti when they were deported in 1940. In Munich and Leipzig homeowners tried to prevent his stones from being placed in front of the doors of their buildings. Munich ultimately rejected Stolpersteine following objections from the city's Jewish community. In Krefeld, the vice-chairman of the Jewish community compared Demnig's memorials to the Nazis' use of Jewish grave stones as slabs for sidewalks. Some of his critics even claim that placing plaques on the street and having people walk all over them is disrespectful towards both the dead and their living descendants. A compromise was

[17] *Stumbling Stones in Berlin: 12 Neighbourhood Walks.* 2014. Published by Aktives Museum Faschimus und Widerstand in Berlin e.V. Koordinierrungsstelle Stolpersteine Berlin KUltureprojekte Berlin BmbH.

eventually reached whereby a Stolperstein is only installed if there is approval from both the building's owner and, if possible, the victim's relative. I see the Robinski Stolpersteine in Kreuzberg and Mitte as the material embodiment of commemorations of my father's family and a refusal to forget their names and their fates.

***

In 1999, three years after my visits to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and Berlin's Landesarchiv, my wife Lauren and I embarked on a journey into the heart of evil. When the bus entered this small Polish town of *Oświęcim* [Auschwitz] we were both taken aback by its grey, drab ordinariness. We drove past suburban houses with their neatly trimmed gardens before arriving at the camp entrance with its familiar sign: *Arbeit Macht Frei*." Walking into the former death camp, we were shocked and dismayed at the sight of people eating in the restaurant. How could anyone sit down and have lunch or tea in such a place? It seemed obscene. Before we left, many hours later, we too sat down and had a meal there, just like all the other Holocaust tourists.

During our visit to Auschwitz, we joined a tour group with an elderly guide, a short, stocky Polish man whose family had been interned at Auschwitz. His family were not Jewish. I had only recently learnt the extent to which non-Jewish Poles were also victims of the Nazis. On the train journey from Berlin to Warsaw, Lauren and I had met a young Polish filmmaker who told us that almost every Polish family had lost relatives in the Second World War. We never knew the degree to which Poles were victims of both the Russians and the Germans; Polish intellectuals, officers and nationalists had been rounded up and killed in their hundreds of thousands. Six million Poles died during the war, three million of whom were Jews. Warsaw was completed flattened, and Poland was forever contaminated by the death camps constructed on its soil. I had not thought about Poland this way before. I had always assumed that the Poles were willing accomplices in the extermination of Jews. I had read about Poles who had attacked and chased away Jews who came back to their villages after the war. But clearly the story was more complicated. A straightforward account of Polish anti-Semitism obscured the centuries-long entangled histories of peaceful coexistence of gentiles and Jews in Poland. It also ignored the staggering suffering and loss of lives in the course of Polish nationalist resistance to both the Nazis and Soviets.

Although I had always thought of my father as German, he and his siblings had in fact been born in what is now Poland. They were German-speaking Jews who lived Silesia, a territory that Poles regarded as historically part of Poland. After the First World War,

when Silesia was returned to Poland, rising anti-German and anti-Jewish sentiment convinced my grandfather to move westwards, towards cosmopolitan Berlin. The cruel irony is that my aunts and uncle were later deported back to Poland.

Throughout my visit to Auschwitz, my video camera was firmly glued to my forehead like a prosthetic screen, creating a protective barrier between myself and the place. I have tried to watch the video footage but I am unable to make much sense of it. The filming is shaky and I feel dizzy and disoriented whenever I try to view it. I filmed everything that unfolded in front of me. I could not really absorb and comprehend what I was seeing and hearing. Perhaps I didn't want to, or maybe I simply couldn't.

It was as if I was a zombie, an automated video filming machine. I was unable to focus on any one scene but flitted from one scene to the next in a mad, neurotic bid to capture everything on film. Filming like this allowed me to switch off my emotional register, and protect myself. I walked about the camp as if in a fugue-like state of dissociation. Reflecting back to the visit, I am not sure what more I could have comprehended, even if the camera had not been stuck onto my forehead. This was a place beyond comprehension, and I walked about like a man stumbling blindly in thick, black fog.

***

A year after my visit to Auschwitz, I returned to Berlin for a public ceremony to inaugurate the installation of Siegfried and Edith Robinski's Stolpersteine in Kreuzberg. These were the first official Stolpersteine in Germany and the Berlin media was there in full force. In my speech at the ceremony, I spoke about how you can walk over the Stolpersteine for years until the day that your eye or shoe tip happens to stumble across them. Suddenly you are confronted with a material trace of a named victim who once lived in your neighbourhood. During my visit I also participated in an event at which school children from the largely Turkish-German, Muslim community of Kreuzberg reported on their research on Nazi victims who once lived in their neighbourhoods. Residents can also pay an amount of 120 euros to adopt Stolpersteine in memory of victims who once lived in their building. Unlike the anonymous mega-monuments imposed on the Berlin cityscape by architects, politicians and city officials, the stumbling stones operate on an intimate, human scale. By 2014 there were Stolpersteine in 900 German cities and municipalities, with over 5000 plaques in Berlin alone, and 40 000 of them in 17 European countries.

A few years after the much publicised Stolpersteine ceremony for Siegfried and Edith in Kreuzberg in 2000, Demnig laid four stones in Mitte next to where my grandparents' Wallner-Theaterstraße 45 apartment once stood. Unlike the Stolpersteine laying ceremony

in Kreuzberg, there was no media and public interest in this event in Mitte. Moreover, the residents that I initially encountered when placing flowers at the Robinski Stolpersteine in Mitte seemed embarrassed and furtive whenever they saw me. In more recent years, they seem to have grown accustomed to our visits, and there are now many more such memorial stones in the neighbourhood.

Once the Robinski Stolpersteine were in place, I thought it was now time to close the chapter on this tragic past. I felt that I had got as far as I could. I had two photographs: the one of the three sad and despairing women, and the other of my grandparents taken in Berlin in 1938. The rest of my family archive consisted of documents recording births and deaths and dates and deportation destinations. The silences and gaps in my knowledge about my father's family seemed insurmountable, and I felt a strong urge to get on with my life. I wanted to focus my work on pressing political realities facing post-apartheid South Africa. I decided to turn my attention to the politics of the present. Dwelling amongst Berlin's ghosts would simply prolong an unsettling state of melancholia. But, despite my determination to return to more worldly matters, I was soon to discover that the otherworldly spectres of Berlin had different plans for me. I could not turn away so easily.

My son Joshua and the Stolpersteine for my grandparents and aunts in Berlin-Mitte

My sons Joshua and Daniel at the Stolpersteine for my grandparents and aunts in Berlin-Mitte

SEVEN

FINDING EUGEN ROBINSKI

In the years that followed, I discovered that I still had much unfinished business to do. While my searches in Berlin seemed to have led me to a cul-de-sac, I now found myself embarking upon a new journey in search of another Robinski ancestor. My great uncle, Eugen Robinski, had settled in the dry Karoo town of Williston in the late nineteenth century. Eugen had died there in 1931, five years before my father arrived in the country. When my father left Germany in 1936 he must have known he had relatives in South Africa, but he probably had no idea where any of them lived.

Shortly after his arrival in Cape Town, my father had a remarkable encounter in a pub in the city centre. Tossie Barnard, an attorney, came over to him and said that he looked identical to a client of his who owned a hotel in the Karoo town of Williston. The name of hotel owner was Robinski, said Barnard. My father excitedly pointed to the name in his passport and stated, in broken English and with a thick German accent, "Me Robinski." Barnard insisted there and then on taking my father to meet the attorney Joe Levy, the husband of one of Eugen's daughters, Hetty.

Herbert on the left with Hetty Levy (with flowers) and kneeling in front is Hetty's son Harold and her husband Joe Levy. I am not sure who the man on the right of Hetty is. The photograph was probably taken at the Cape Town harbour when Herbert left with Hetty and Harold for Port Elizabeth in 1936.

Soon after they met, Hetty invited my father to relocate with her to Port Elizabeth. Hetty was in the process of separating from her husband and she believed that there would be better work opportunities for both of them in Port Elizabeth. But the real attraction was probably the fact that Hetty's half-sisters - Evelyn, Laura and Lilly, the three South

African-born daughters from Eugen's second wife Ray Elsie - lived there. When Hetty's son Harold Levy first told me that my father was deeply fearful of moving to Port Elizabeth with his mother, I was puzzled. I later discovered that pro-Nazi Greyshirts were very active in the city in the mid-1930s. This probably accounted for my father's reluctance to leave the relative safety and security of liberal Cape Town. But moving to Port Elizabeth he gained entry into the intimate family circle of Eugen's four daughters.

In July 2010, intrigued by stories of Eugen Robinski's large-than-life presence in Williston in the Karoo, I dragged my family along with me on a road trip to visit this small town in which my great uncle Eugen had lived. It was during the FIFA Soccer World Cup and I had to make sure that we had television access at the B&Bs we stayed at along the way. My sons would have mutinied had they not been able to watch the matches. They would have preferred to have stayed in Cape Town but my wife and I were determined to combine a family roots journey with a holiday in the Karoo countryside. Driving over six hundred kilometres from Cape Town to Williston to find traces of Eugen Robinski transported us to another world, a dry and barren landscape of vast, empty space and stony silence.

When we approached Williston, we crossed a small bridge and pass over a dried-up river. In front of us was a granite hill with name Williston inscribed on it with white stones. The town centre is dominated by the imposing granite stone structure of the Dutch Reformed Church which was built in 1878. Next to the church is Robinski Street, and a little further along the main road is the run-down Williston Hotel and bottle store that were once owned by Eugen Robinski. The main road also has a museum building and a few general dealer stores. It was in the museum that I found the Victorian-style portrait of Eugen staring at the camera with the comportment of a distinguished town elder with a well pressed white collar shirt, tie, waistcoat, and suit jacket.

Eugen Isaac Robinski, the patriarch and town elder of Williston - a survivor at the tip of Africa

With the help of the local amateur historian, Elsa van Schalwyk, I had found traces of a Robinski whose presence still loomed large in the historical memory of this desolate frontier town. His presence was inscribed in Robinski Street, in his official portrait in the museum, in press clippings proclaiming his hotel as the first double-storey building in the entire Karoo, in the memories of his descendants, in his large marble tombstone in the Jewish section of the cemetery, and in the town's official records and local folklore.

Eugen had acquired semi-mythological status amongst his descendants for a number of reasons. Not only did he become the town's mayor and have a street named after him, but in 1903 when he built the double-storey hotel the builders forgot to put stairs in. The mystique surrounding him was heightened by the many conflicting accounts of the unusual circumstances of his departure from Prussia in the late 1880s. After searching for decades in Berlin for material traces of his brother's family, I now had stumbled across Eugen Robinski, a fugitive-turned-mayor who had left his mark in this small Karoo town.

Williston Hotel, c.1930s

Whenever I asked family members about him, I was given contradictory accounts. Some said that Eugen, a physically robust man with a combustible temper, had beaten up and "bounced" a drunken customer from his father's Konigsberg pub and that the man had subsequently died. The dead man, referred to in some accounts as a Cossack, was found the following morning. Some believed that Eugen had killed the man by mistake, while others implied that he had died of exposure or else been robbed and murdered by someone else after Eugen bounced him out of the pub. Most accounts agreed on one thing, that Eugen had been arrested and imprisoned in a Konigsberg jail from which he managed to escape.

My father told my brother Michael a slightly different story. In this version Eugen is on a horse galloping towards a guard at the border between Prussia and Russia. At the border post, Eugen gets into an argument with the guard and knocks him down with a powerful punch. The guard is badly injured and taken to hospital where he dies. Fearful of being arrested, Eugen decides to flee Prussia for Africa. Michael's son Isaac, an art student, produced an illustrated version of this particular account:

Isaac Robins' illustration of Eugen's dramatic flight from Prussia.

There are also divergent accounts of Eugen's flight from prison. Some say that his father bribed the warden to help him escape, others say that Eugen's father had made generous donations to the local church that the warden's father attended, and the warden returned a favour. A third account suggests that Eugen was given the day off on Yom Kippur, and he used the opportunity to take flight. Whatever the truth may be, what we do know is that he arrived in Cape Town in 1888, and soon thereafter he moved northwards to Williston. What we also know is that Eugen had forever left behind the big city life of Konigsberg.

The Williston Hotel with Eugen Robinski in the middle in the front row

Shortly after arriving in Williston, at the age of 21, Eugen began the process of reinventing himself; he took on the name of Isaac, and transformed himself into a successful businessman, hotel owner and mayor of the town. With the discovery of Eugen's large footprint in this tiny Karoo town, I began to view my family's past through different eyes. We now had roots in the South African countryside. Our founding ancestor was a proverbial son of the soil, sheep farmer *nogal*; clearly not all Jews are genetically hardwired to careers in the professions and business.

Eugen Robinski was no doubt a tough and resilient *Boerjood* (Jewish farmer). He comes across as a large muscular man firmly rooted in hard soil of the vast and unforgiving Karoo desert. He not only managed to transform himself from a fugitive into a respectable town elder, but he came to embody the habits of the archetypical frontiersman. I can imagine him standing tall in the bright sunlight beneath big blue skies and the purple hills of the Karoo. This romantic image could not further from the greyness of Berlin with its ghostly shadows. But I was soon to learn that Williston had its own share of ghosts, graveyards, genocide.

I made a second visit to Williston in 2012, this time with the filmmaker Mark Kaplan and a Stellenbosch University anthropology colleague and friend, Kees van der Waal. This turned out to be a much more adventurous road trip than we had anticipated. The adventure began for us at the quirky Williston Mall, one of the local spots advertised in all the tourist brochures. The Williston Mall is a ramshackle B&B with a pub and restaurant, and a garden with all sorts of detritus and discarded objects and readymade artworks. The owners are two young alternative and eccentric Afrikaner artists who

organise the annual Williston Winter Festival. It was while sipping our morning coffee there that we first heard the story of *Die Lank Ou en Die Kort Ou* (The Tall Guy and the Short Guy). We were waiting for the rest of our breakfast to arrive when Pieter came across to breathlessly regale us a fabulous tale that had Charles Herman Bosman's imprint all over it. The story began with the arrival in the town of two strangers. Kort Ou told local residents that he wished to buy five properties in the town. The problem was that he did not have the cash at his disposal and had to borrow relatively large sums of money from locals while he waited for the bank to release his funds. But his physical appearance created niggling doubts and suspicion amongst Williston's residents. His clothes were dishevelled and most of front row teeth missing. His appearance and general demeanour did not fit that of a well-off property buyer. This made the potential sellers jittery. But they were desperate to get rid of properties in a town that had been in economic decline for decades. The town was divided down the middle. Pieter had even betted with the local estate agent that if the stranger turned out to be a con artist, then the estate agent would have to run through the town naked; and if he turned out to be a genuine property buyer then Pieter would strip. The town waited for ten days in bated breath for the truth to be revealed. Pieter turned out to be on the money; *Die Lank Ou en Die Kort Ou* were found out to be small-town conmen.

Before we discovered they were tricksters, we did a film interview with Kort Ou. He came across as a reasonably plausible character. I even told him on camera that when my great uncle had arrived in the town in the late 1880s, his appearance had probably also provoked much suspicion amongst the local residents. Yet, this German-speaking immigrant from Prussia ended up becoming a successful businessman and later went on to become the mayor of Williston. Kort Ou seemed to enjoy my story about Robinski and suggested to us that his situation was identical. He then offered to take us to one of the five properties that he was in the process of buying. My curiosity was piqued when he told me that a Rabbi Klein had once lived there. He said that the Rabbi had buried loads of money in the basement. When we arrived at the property which was being used as a general dealer's store, Kort Ou showed us where the basement had once been. It was now sealed and nobody knew what had happened to the Rabbi's money. We heard more wondrous tales about Rabbi Klein when we interviewed a group of elderly Afrikaans women in the local old-aged home. One of them recalled that as a child she would run away whenever she saw this knife-wielding, bearded Rabbi in his long black cloak. The Rabbi was no doubt on his way to perform a kosher slaughter. But for this young Afrikaans girl he was a frightening figure clad in black. Eugen's grandson, Harold Levy, told us that as a twelve-year-old boy in the

mid-1930s he had studied for his bar mitzvah with the reclusive Rabbi Klein. He recalled having his Cheder lessons in the Rabbi's dark and dank cellar. The story goes that the Rabbi became a hermit when his marriage proposal to a beautiful Jewish woman from the town was rejected. It is said that he never recovered from this.

Harold also told me about how, as a young boy of about nine, he had heard the fiery speech of the rabble-rousing Afrikaner Nationalist D.F. Malan. Malan, then a Member of Parliament in the neighbouring Calvinia district, had broken away from Smuts's governing United Party in 1934 to form the Purified National Party. Malan's party not only demanded the ending of Jewish immigration, but also discriminatory laws against recent arrivals from Europe. Party ideologues claimed that Jews were "unassimilable" and that their domination in commerce and the professions threatened Afrikaner interests. So when Malan tried to book the local Williston hall, which was owned by the Jewish Abrahams brothers, nicknamed Vaal and Swart, the latter refused to let this anti-Semitic rabble-rouser use their building. Malan was forced to hold his meeting outdoors. Harold recalled making his way to the front of the large crowd and hearing Malan's shrill and chilling sentence: '*Die Jood is soos n bosluis. Hy suig die bloed van die Afrikaner*' (The Jew is like a parasite, he sucks the blood of the Afrikaner). These words still sent shivers down his spine, he said. This was not Harold's only encounter with anti-Semitism in Williston; his Afrikaans teacher proudly wore a Swastika brooch to school.

I was to learn more about anti-Semitism in this rural town from the Williston-born historian, Dr Robert Otto Herbst. Dr Herbst, a professor at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth, told me that his Afrikaans-speaking family harboured deep resentments towards Jews such as Robinski, who were blamed for the dramatic decline of rural Afrikaners' fortunes in the Karoo in the 1920s and 1930s. Dr Herbst's family held Robinski and other local Jewish merchants responsible for the family's fall from grace. By the mid-twentieth century, the Herbst family had lost all their land and were living as poor whites adjacent to the Coloured settlement of Amandelboom (renamed Williston in 1883). Robert Otto, who now goes by the name of Aubrey to escape what he describes as his depressing and dysfunctional family background, told me that his father's antipathy towards Jewish merchants such as Robinski led him to join the pro-Nazi Greyshirts in the early 1940s.

In my first telephone conversations with Aubrey in 2013, couldn't believe anyone could be interested in the history of Williston. In 2005 he had completed his doctorate on the history of the relationship of Williston's mixed-race "Basters" and the mid-nineteenth

century German Rhenish Mission Station at Amandelboom. But he abandoned his research topic convinced that this obscure history from a remote and marginal part of the country was of little interest to anyone. My arrival on the scene rekindled his passion for "my Basters", as he called them. He confided that because of his profoundly unhappy memories of growing up in a poor white family in Williston he chose a doctoral thesis topic that he was sure had absolutely nothing to do with his family background. He focused on the mid-nineteenth century, a period before the disastrous decline of his family's fortunes. While Aubrey was desperately running away from his family background, I was determined to retrieve traces of my family's past; it was this obsession of mine that had brought me to the small Karoo town.

***

Eugen Robinsky is seated on the left, and Dr Robert Otto Herbst is seated on the right;
The photograph was taken in Williston c.1896, eight years after Robinsky arrived in the town.

Eugen's elevated social position in Amandelboom is captured in a photograph that Elsa the local historian found in a wooden cabinet in a municipal building. Seated on the far left of this 1896 portrait of a group of white, male elders is my great uncle Eugen. The photograph, taken in 1896, consists of eleven sombre-looking bearded and moustached men. Included in the photograph are the Amandelboom town *dominee*, the prosecutor, the magistrate, a handful of businessmen and the town's doctor. Robinski is leaning forward and he has a forceful expression of urgency. He looks as if he is bracing himself for a titanic battle to secure his place in the colonial pecking order. Of all these men with their beards, moustaches, black hats and suits, Robinski looks the most earnest. I see in his penetrating

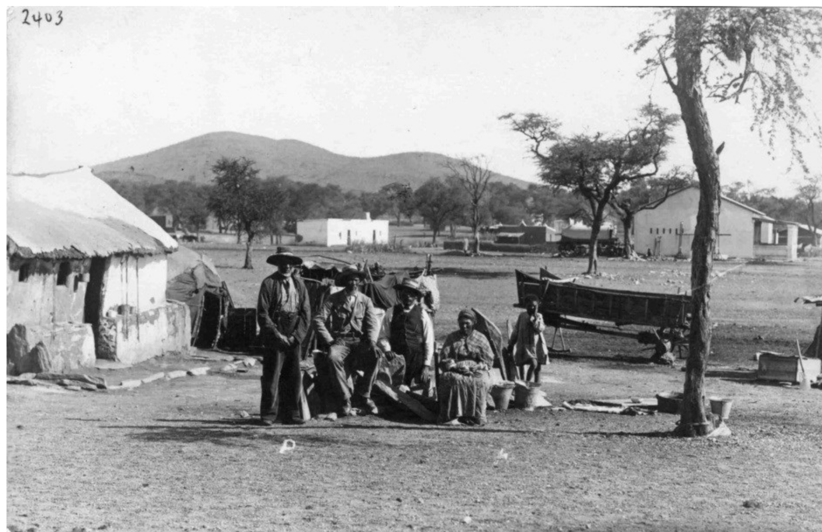
eyes and robust physique the outward signs of a tough frontiersman. He also comes across as someone fleeing a deeply troubled past. As with the family photographs of Edith and the rest of her family, I project many things onto the surface of this photograph.

Eugen and the other male elders pose for the camera with their stiff postures of colonial rank and authority. They lived in a violent frontier world where, only a couple of decades earlier, there had been bloody skirmishes between mixed-race Basters and Afrikaner Trekboers on the one side of the battle line, and the Bushman (San) on the other. By 1896, when the photograph was taken, the joint Trekboer and Baster Commandos had all but decimated the Bushmen, and the white colonial social order had been brutally enforced. By then there were also few traces of the semi-nomadic lifestyles of the Baster pastoralists of Amandelboom. The latter had lost their land to the white Trekboers in the 1860s, and been pushed northwards. Evidence of the historical presence of the Bushmen and Basters is barely visible in the museum or in local histories of Williston. It is a buried past whose only traces are the beaten faces of the Williston poor.

There is another story embedded in this 1896 portrait of the town elders. On the far left sits Aubrey Herbst's great grandfather, the local herbalist Dr Robert Otto Herbst. Dr Herbst, an elderly grey-bearded man, is dressed in a dark jacket and white flannels. Although Aubrey was named after this man, as an adult he made the decision to reject the name Robert Otto and everything else associated with his family's past, especially his heavy-drinking, absent father. As soon as he finished high school he went off to study history at Stellenbosch University. He didn't return to Williston until two decades later. His shame at being poor white had left lifelong scars. Yet, after a few telephone and email exchanges about the history of the Basters and Robinski, Aubrey decided to drive a thousand kilometres from Port Elizabeth to meet us in Williston. He became the film's narrator on the mid-nineteenth-century Basters at the Amandelboom Rhenish Mission Station. As he told me, he had managed to run away from his Williston past, until I came along. Now he was reliving his romance with "his Basters".

Aubrey had written about how, in the 1860s onwards, Amandelboom had witnessed an escalation of conflict between the semi-nomadic Baster pastoralists and encroaching Afrikaner Trekboers over access to land and water. The Trekboers ultimately won and the Basters and their missionary allies were pushed northwards, eventually settling in the early 1870s in Rehoboth in German South West Africa (now Namibia). It was the departure of the Basters from Amandelboom that created business opportunities for Jewish merchants such as Robinski. My great-uncle bought up a number of Baster town and farm properties

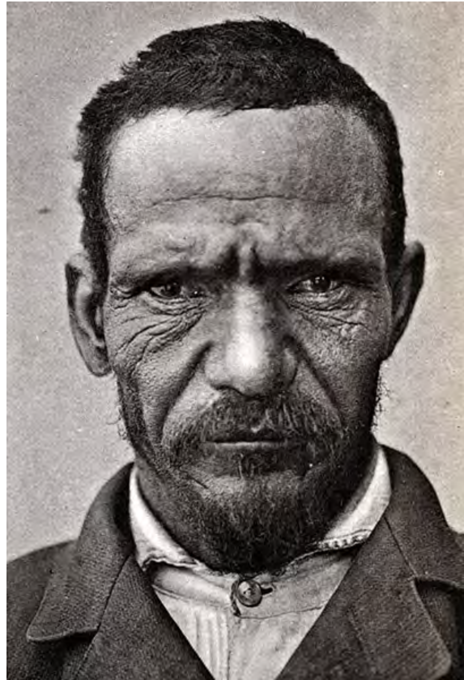
in the wake of the Basters' dispossession. From here the story took an even stranger turn. In 1908, the German anthropologist Eugen Fischer arrived in Rehoboth to study the effects of miscegenation amongst the mixed-race Basters. Many of these Rehoboth Basters were the same people who had been forced out of Amandelboom in the 1860s. In 1913 Fischer published his ethnography of the Basters.[18] It received much international acclaim and glowing reviews. Fischer's illustrious academic career was about to take off. By the late 1920s he was one of Europe's leading scientists and a key figure in an international eugenics movement. By the early 1930s, he had become one of the Nazis' most senior racial scientists.



Baster group at Rehoboth

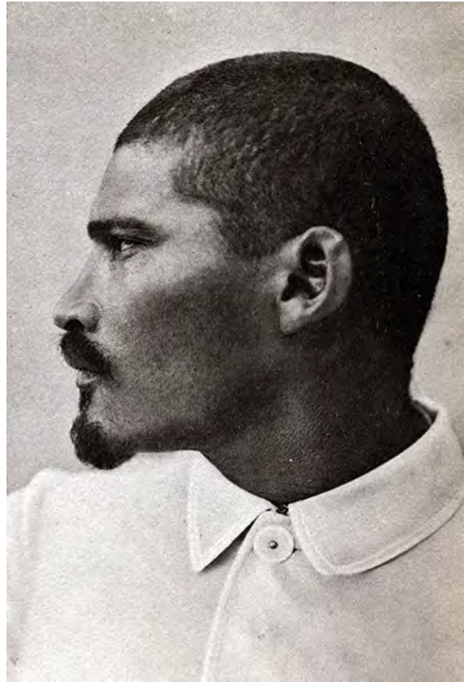
Baster splinter group from Rehoboth on the steps of Tintenpalast after signing an agreement with South Africa in Windhoek, n.d.. The two photographs above are from the National Museum of Namibia in Windhoek.

[18] Fischer, Eugen, 1913 (1961) Die *Rehobother Bastards* und das Bastardisierungsproblem beim Menschen. Anthropologische und ethnologische Studien am Rehobother Bastardvolk in Deutsch-Sudwestafrika, Jena 1913, reprint Graz 1961.



Fischer: *Die Rehobother Bastards.* Table. 4. Fig.4. Matheus Diergaart.
http://www.velesova-sloboda.org/album/fischer-rehobother-bastards.html. Photograph from Eugen Fischer

Fischer: Die Rehobother Bastards. Table 12. Fig.2. Children of Matheus Diergaart.



Fischer: *Die Rehobother Bastards.* Table 9. Fig.4. Petrus Diergaart.

Fischer: *Die Rehobother Bastards.* Table. 12. Fig.1. Mechil, Anna and Margaret Diergaart.

***

Eugen Robinski arrived in Amandelboom in 1888, having fled Konigsberg in East Prussia, then the capital of East Prussia (now Russia's Kalingrad Oblast region). This was a time when it was still relatively easy for Eastern European Jews to immigrate to South Africa. But anti-Semitism was beginning to intensify. These sentiments found regular expression in the local press. Jews were either caricatured in cartoons as hook-nosed, dirty and shifty traders, or else as rapacious Jewish capitalists captured in the popular cartoon character Hoggenheimer.[19] If they were not miserly country *smouse* (itinerant traders) or profiteering capitalists, then they were bound to be dangerous Bolsheviks. While the established Anglo-German Jewish middle class had been able to assimilate into the white Anglo settler population, it was the dishevelled, bearded, Yiddish-speaking working-class Jewish immigrants from Lithuania and Latvia who were routinely portrayed as shady pedlars, pariahs, shirkers and undesirable and unassimilable outsiders. Even their status as whites and Europeans was questioned in parliament. Debates centred on whether Yiddish was to be considered a European language or not. Yet, as long as the mining and industrial economy was growing, European immigrants, even Eastern European Jews, were seen as useful recruits into the white settler population. So, Eastern European Jewish immigrants were able to make their way to small rural towns by ox wagon, and quickly establish themselves as successful itinerant traders. Most made a decent living selling their wares to white farmers scattered across the vast desolate Northern Cape countryside. This was certainly the case with Eugen Robinski who, shortly after docking in Cape Town in 1888, undertook the gruelling six-hundred kilometre journey northwards into the dry Karoo hinterland. By the time he died peacefully in his bed in 1931, Eugen had become a successful businessman. As my photograph of him with the town elders suggested, he was considered to be a man of substance; he had left his imprint on this small Karoo town. He also left behind a large and thriving family. Whereas Eugen had prospered at the tip of Africa, this was certainly not the case for his brother David.

By the 1960s there were virtually no Jews left in towns like Williston. Eugen's large family had either moved to the cities of Port Elizabeth, Cape Town and Johannesburg, or else they had dispersed to England, Canada, the United States, Australia and Israel. Eugen had ensured that his children all received good educations. Many went on to become successful professionals and businesspeople but they all retained a nostalgic attachment to Williston and visited for family pilgrimages.

---

[19] Milton Shain, 1994. *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in South Africa.* Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press.

Although I had no childhood attachments to Williston, or any kinship direct claims to Eugen's lineage, I was intrigued by the life of this patriarch whose descendants had survived and flourished. I was also curious as to how this ex-fugitive was able to rise to prominence so rapidly in this small, parochial farming community. He possibly received a warm reception from the German speakers associated with the Rhenish Mission Station at Amandelboom. The German missionaries, town establishment and local Afrikaner farmers may have been impressed by his literacy competency, European urbaneness and business savvy. By the time he arrived, the indigenous San, Khoi and Basters had already been defeated, decimated and displaced.

Aubrey Herbst had spent months in the Rhennish Mission Archives in Wuppertal in Germany paging through the diaries of missionaries who were stationed at Amandelboom. The missionary Heidmann wrote in one of his diary entries in 1847 about an unnerving interaction with Paul Diegaardt, a prominent Baster leader in Amandelboom. He describes how Diergaardt presented him with a one-year-old Bushman child who had been captured during a Bushman and springbok hunt. Diergaardt, who had been part of a combined Baster and Boer Commando, reported to Heidmann that his men had shot and killed 46 to 48 Bushmen, including 21 males, and captured three women and twelve children. The diary reveals that the Basters routinely joined Boers in these brutal Bushmen massacres.

Diegaardt's story captures the tragic ironies and ethical grey zones of everyday life in this violent Northern Cape frontier. The diary also reveals that when Diergaardt handed over the Bushman child survivor to Heidmann, the missionary had the child washed, her hair was shaved, she was given new clothes and she was taken into his household as a servant. This ritual of cleansing and conversion was a common practice. The symbolic violence of this Christian 'civilising process' was inscribed on the bodies of these child survivors. In this bloody colonial frontier, the Basters were both victims and perpetrators. This was a world of grey zones and complicated complicities.

I wonder what Eugen made of this white, colonial world. Did he seamlessly acquire the brutal habits of European domination? Whatever his response was, he managed to successfully insinuate himself into the colonial social order. He was rewarded for his efforts and became mayor from 1911 to 1913. But there was another side to this *smous*-to-mayor success story. Eugen Robinski was by all accounts a restless man with a troubled past; he had rough edges to him. He also had an unpredictable temperament. He tried to drown his demons with heavy drinking. His efforts to reinvent himself had required work. He not only

applied for citizenship of a new country, but he also changed his name, from Eugen to Isaac; and, soon after his arrival, he was answering to the name Izak.

At the age of 15, Eugen had married Dora Gordon, apparently to avoid conscription into the Prussian army. He was 21 years of age when he was forced to flee Prussia. His application for naturalisation was submitted to the magistrate's office on 10 April 1893 in Carnarvon in the Northern Cape. To the magistrate's question: "Have you ever been convicted and sentenced to any of the following crimes: Treason, Murder, Culpable Homicide, Rape, Theft, Fraud, Perjury or Forgery", the former Prussian fugitive answered "No". At the time, he was 26 years old and already the owner of General Dealer Store in Driefontein District in Fraserberg, a small town near Williston.

A Williston school photograph of one of Eugen's four sons, Isidore Robinsky (left back row) with his arm around another child.

A few years after Eugen's arrival in South Africa, his wife, Dora Gordon, joined him in Williston. Eugen and Dora had five children: Isidore, David, Ellen, Max and Hetty. Upon the death of Dora in 1904, Eugen married Ray Elsie, who gave him four daughters: Evelyn, Lilly, Esther and Laura. Apparently his second wife, a delicate, prim and petite woman, had hoped to marry an Englishman, but when this romantic relationship fell apart it was arranged that she would leave England to marry a successful Jewish trader in South Africa. The urbane Dora could not have anticipated what she would find in the harsh, arid hinterland of the North West Cape. Neither could she have known that she was about to marry a taciturn, hardened frontiersman with whom she had very little in common. Eugen's grandson, Jeffrey Racki, once told me that Ray Elsie never used his first name and instead

always referred to him as Robinski. There was apparently nothing tender or endearing about him and they had a troubled relationship. He became even more withdrawn.

During a visit to Williston in 2012 I discovered that Eugen had not confined his sexual relations to his two wives, Dora and Ray Elsie. I met an Afrikaans-speaking Williston man in his early seventies who confided to me that his grandmother had had an affair with Robinski, and that his mother was the result of this relationship. I shook his hand and said, 'Welcome. We're relatives.' He laughed and seemed relieved to have finally unburdened himself of this family secret. Robinski had at least ten children from his two wives and his mistress; he was clearly a prolific and virile man. I found it strangely comforting that this Robinski survivor had planted his seeds so widely in the Karoo.

After Eugen died in 1931, his descendants began leaving for the cities. By the 1970s, the last Jew standing in Williston was Eugen's grandson Leonard Oddes. Leonard sold the hotel in the late 1970s and moved to Israel with his family. The exodus of the Robinski clan from the Karoo was part of a much wider movement of Jews from these small country towns. In 1950 Gittel Oddes became the last Jew to be buried in the local Jewish cemetery. All that visibly remains of the Jews of Williston is Robinski Street, a dozen tombstones in the tiny Jewish cemetery, and a standard repertoire of stories and jokes about Williston's Jews and money that are routinely regaled at the Williston Mall pub. The local historian Else van Schaulkwyk told me one of these stories. It revolves around Eugen and events that supposedly took place at the time of the South African War (1899-1902). The Boers captured a small group of British soldiers and took them to Robinski's hotel. Once there they began to eat, drink and be merry, and they managed to rake up a massive bill. It was agreed that whoever won the war would have to pay up. After the cessation of hostilities, the British ended up paying Robinski the expenses incurred.

I met an elderly local storyteller who had passed on his full repertoire on to his son. The father and his son rattled off jokes and quirky stories about Williston's Jews. Some of these were laced with nostalgic reminisces about how Jews had helped Afrikaners with loans in times of drought. But these accounts masked Afrikaner resentment that Jewish merchants had once controlled the Williston economy. Jewish moneylenders had also repossessed the farms of poor Afrikaners who failed to repay their loans. In the 1930s, Greyshirts and Afrikaner Nationalists mobilised this festering resentment by conjuring up archetypical imagery of the parasitic Jewish moneylenders, the Shylocks of the Karoo.

Despite this complicated history of ambivalent relationships between Jews and Afrikaners, South African Jews who grew up in in the Karoo are often deeply nostalgic

about Northern Cape towns such as Williston. This is evident in a collection of reminisces compiled by Eugen's descendants in 1991. Entitled *Memories of Williston: A Tribute to Leonard Oddes on his 70th Birthday*, these writings celebrate the life and times of Eugen's grandson, Leonard Oddes. The book, which was compiled by Oddes' children and grandchildren, contains fond memories of an idyllic Williston in which Jews lived comfortably amongst Afrikaners. Indigenous people barely feature at all in the accounts. Eugen is also hardly mentioned in his glowing tribute to Eugen's grandson Leonard, who took over ownership of the Williston Hotel from Eugen's son Isidore. Leonard's daughter, Merle Oddes Harris, was only able to come up with two sentences about the enigmatic Eugen. "Our great grandfather, Isaac Eugene Robinski, came to Williston from Lithuania some time towards the end of the 19th century. He was a *smous*, a travelling salesman, who bought two farms in Williston and so became a farmer. Later he became the first mayor of Williston, and there is a still a street named after him." That is all we learn about him; his interior, psychic world remains a mystery, hidden away behind impenetrable walls and stony silences.

Collette Thorne, the granddaughter of Eugen Robinski, and SR in front of a painting of Eugen done by Collette's granddaughter, Julia Eikhorn.

As a child, I was regularly in the company of three of Eugen's daughters - Evelyn, Lily and Laura – without knowing how these three women were related to my father. Not that I showed any interest then in knowing about my father's family history. After scratching around in Williston and the Cape National Archives, I now know a little more about my great-uncle Eugen: he was a frontiersman, a loner, a heavy drinker and a man prone to violent outbursts. Eugen's grandson Jeffrey Racki was told by his mother Evelyn

how his grandfather punched a farm worker across the floor of his garage in a fit of blind fury. Jeffrey's mother also told him that some of Eugen's children had to turn to the courts when they became convinced that he would squander their late mother's estate on drink and bad business deals. Jeffrey's mother also told him about how Eugen had taken a Bushman girl into his household after her mother arrived at his home begging to exchange her child for medicines and food supplies. The child, renamed Bushy, became the childhood friend of my Aunt Evelyn. Jeffrey believed that his mother became friends with Bushy because she too was a marginal figure - she was teased and rejected by most white children because she was both Jewish and a "cripple". The Bushman girl and the Jewish girl with the clubfoot apparently kept contact into well into adulthood.

Aunt Evelyn (on left) with my mother, probably taken in Washington DC, where she died well into her nineties.

Reading between the lines of this seemingly innocent story of a childhood friendship I see traces of a colonial frontier past in which Bushman feature as victims of extraordinary violence. Such signs of unspeakable brutality haunt Aubrey Herbst's account of the exchange between the Baster leader Paul Diergaart and the Rhennish missionary over what to do with the Bushman child survivor. I interpret this conversation as a frightening foreshadowing of what is to come. Eugen Fischer's arrival at Diergaart's Baster settlement in Rehoboth in 1908, shortly after the Herero genocide, was one of the catalysts for a series of contingent events that culminated in catastrophic consequences for the Robinski family trapped in Berlin in the eye of the storm.

EIGHT

FINDING THE LETTERS

When Mark Kaplan and I began working on our documentary film on the Robinski family history in August 2012, one of our first interviews was with two of Eugen Robinski's granddaughters, Deidre and Collette. We wanted to speak to the two sisters, who were then in their late seventies, about their recollections of growing up in the small Northern Cape town of Calvinia, which is near Williston. We knew that they had grown up speaking Afrikaans as their home language, and had come to see themselves as *boeremeisies* (Afrikaans girls). Their parents had very little to do with the local Jewish community, and it was only when they were adults that they learnt the rituals and basic tenets of Judaism. We planned to meet at Deidre's flat in Sea Point, but I had to first attend prayers for the passing away of my Aunt Elsa, the widow of my father's brother Artur. It was on that cold winter's morning that I first found out about the existence of the letters. This discovery changed everything.

I was at prayers for my late Aunt Elsa when her children David and Cecilia told me about the letters. A couple of days earlier, while they were "sitting Shiva" (the Jewish grieving ritual) at their late mother's Sea Point beachfront flat, they had found a plastic bag with letters loosely stacked in a large pile. They had been cleaning their mother's bedroom when they came across the plastic bag in a cupboard. As we sat together around the dining room table in Cecelia's Sea Point flat poring over the letters, I sensed that the black hole of silence was about to be broken. The ancestors had given us an invaluable gift.

Berlin d. 20/4. 39.

291

Mein lieber guter Junge! Da Dein Geburtstag herannaht, will ich Dir schon heute unsere innigsten Gratulationen senden, verbunden mit den herzlichsten Glückwünschen für Dein ferneres Wohlergehen. Der Allgütige verleihe Dir vor allem beste dauernde Gesundheit und mögest Du in dem fernen Erdteil eine neue, glückliche Heimat finden, wo Du vollste Zufriedenheit und die Erfüllung Deiner Sehnsuchtsträume erlebst. Es ist für uns kein angenehmes Gefühl, Dich an diesem Tag so allein zu wissen, zumal unsere Gedanken bei Dir weilen werden. Wir werden uns an den Geburtstagstisch setzen und bei Kaffee und Kuchen Dein Bild in der Mitte, [illegible]

Letter sent by my grandmother to my Uncle Artur on 20 April 1939. She writes, "May the All-Merciful should above all grant you good health and may you find a happy home in the far-away continent where you will experience the fullest contentment and the fulfilment of the dreams of your yearning".

A few of the letters were written or typed in English but most were handwritten in German Gothic script. Cecelia knew some German and tried to decipher this antiquated script but all she could fathom was that most had been sent to my father and his brother Artur from Berlin between 1936, the year my father arrived in South Africa, and 1943, the year my father's family were deported. Most were written by my grandmother Cecilie and Aunt Edith, but some were from family members in East Prussia, Sweden and Bolivia. We speculated that these were from desperate relatives requesting Artur and my father to help them escape. But this was as far as we could get. We needed a translator, urgently.

The well-known South African crime fiction writer Margie Orford pointed out to me that every time I touched the fine paper of the letters, my fingertips came into contact with the material remains of my father's parents and siblings. Their actual DNA was imprinted on these sheets of soft, yellow, translucent tissue-like paper. Margie also reminded me that it was as if the letter writers had been waiting, patiently, for decades, for someone to find, and touch, them. The ghosts of Berlin demanded my response. I had within my grasp their own words, the material inscriptions of their thoughts, desires, hopes, fears and dreams. Staring at the fine hand-writing, I knew my obligation to respond was non-negotiable - Edith had been waiting for close to eighty years for my reply. Edith's eyes were more imploring and insistent than ever. I tried to imagine what lay on the other side of this impenetrable linguistic wall. I was impatient. I needed to know what inner thoughts were inscribed onto this thin, fragile yellow paper. I now had within my grasp much more than

the raw, brute facts of the bureaucratic documents that I had collected in archives. I had within my reach the letter writers' own words, carefully inscribed on soft, delicate paper.
I was initially puzzled why the letters had all been stored at my Uncle Artur's flat. Why had he been chosen as the custodian of the letters, and why had he not told his children about them? Had the brothers re-read them after the war? Why were they hidden away in a dark cupboard in Artur's flat? Perhaps, once the brothers discovered the terrible truth, it became too painful to dwell on the past. The letters had to be buried away for eternity.

During the war years, letters were circulated widely amongst family all over the world. A family member would receive a letter, read it, and then send it on elsewhere, to another relative desperate for news. These were collective forms of communication at a time when desperately worried relatives were doing all they could to remain in contact with each other.

The first translations were done by two German-speaking students in Cape Town. Some of my family members were overwhelmed when reading them. Cecilia told me that she found unbearably sad and painful to read the translated letters from her grandmother Cecilie. It soon became apparent that there were glaring gaps in some of the translations because the translators were struggling to decipher the handwritten German Gothic script. Also known as Blackletter, this script was used throughout Western Europe from about 1150 until the 17th century, and persisted in Germany well into the 20th century. Since Artur and Herbert had passed away in the early 1990s, and none of their offspring could read German, never mind Gothic script, I urgently needed to find someone to make sense of this ancient script.

***

I first met Ute Ben Josef in March 2013 at the café at Cape Town's Holocaust Centre. Ute is an art historian and former director of the Jacob Gitlin Library in the Holocaust Centre building. When we first met she seemed cautious. A few days earlier I had sent her an email requesting to do a film interview with her about Eugen Fischer. I had been told by a number of people that Ute had worked at the Namibian Scientific Society in Windhoek in the mid-1960s and that she was knowledgeable about Fischer and the Rehoboth Basters. A few days later I received a reply from her:

02 March 2013 07:19 PM

Dear Steven

It is strange that you contact me. I was born in Rehoboth Namibia and my family farm was on the border of the "Baster Land". For some reason I was confronted with the issue you are dealing with, without knowing consciously, anything about it. I worked for the "Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft" [Scientific Society] in Windhoek under a Dr. R and he dictated letters to me to Eugen Fischer, whose friend and admirer he seemed to have been. I did not know about Eugen Fischer, or Nazis. But later I found out that Dr R.was a Nazi – and you know about Eugen Fischer. He was the spiritual father of [Josef] Mengele, one may say… There is a book also by Eugen Fischer about the Rehoboth Basters in the National Library in the Gardens. But it is a second edition, printed in 1939. It gives the stories of each of the families but it omits what it said in the first edition, namely that his research on the Rehoboth Basters show that they are a lower nation of mixed race. I can't remember the words which are horrible.

Of course I would love to speak to you about this topic. But I don't know whether I could help you… Sorry. I have such scant knowledge about it all and much emotion.

When we met a few days later, Ute told me that she had typed letters sent to Eugen Fischer between 1966 and 1968. In her twenties, she had been the secretary for Dr H.J. Rust, a former Nazi and director of the South West African Scientific Society (*Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft)* in Windhoek. Ute routinely typed Dr Rust's letters to his dear friend Dr Fischer. At the time, Ute thought of Fischer as a harmless, kind old man. The correspondence between the two elderly ex-Nazis continued until Fischer died in his mid-nineties. It was over three decades later that she learnt that Fischer had studied the Rehoboth Basters in 1908, and later used his Rehoboth findings to support Nazi racial science.

Ute had grown up on a farm adjacent to Rehoboth in South West Africa. During her childhood, in the post-war years, any talk of Hitler and the Nazis was totally taboo. Yet, there were exceptions to this rule of silence. She recalled that her father would perform a prank whereby his dog would get a treat for raising a paw in a Heil Hitler salute. As a child, Ute learnt to laugh at her father's favourite party trick. But, for the rest of the time, there was pact of silence about how, during the 1930s and 1940s, South West Africa's German-

speaking white population had turned the country into a stronghold of Nazi support. In fact, it became the biggest bastion of Nazism outside of Europe.

On 19 April 1939, a contingent of three hundred South African police were sent to South West Africa with the sole purpose of abolishing the South West African police force because of the perceived threat of a Nazi coup; the country was to be given to Hitler as a birthday present. Rob Gordon, an anthropologist who grew up in Keetmanshoop in southern Namibia where his Jewish father was mayor, told me that whenever his father visited small towns in the district during the 1930s and the war years, he would be greeted with "Heil Hitler" salutes. This was the world that Ute grew up in. But, as an adult, she was to make a dramatic break with her upbringing.

In the late 1960s, Ute left her job at the Scientific Society in Windhoek and started her doctoral studies in Art History in Pretoria. It was while she was studying there that she met an Israeli lecturer in Jewish Studies at the University of South Africa (UNISA). They fell madly in love and Ute decided to convert to Judaism so they could marry. Her parents were deeply disappointed with her decision to marry this Jewish scholar, who was to become an influential, progressive rabbi in the South African Reform movement. Some years later, Ute accompanied her husband to his new post in Switzerland, where she 'moonlighted' as an art critic, often writing about Jewish and Holocaust survivor artists. Ute and her husband eventually settled in Cape Town, where she took up a position as the chief librarian of the Gitlin Library at the Cape Town Holocaust Centre. It was there that she met the Berlin-based former director of the Wannsee Museum, Dr Annegret Ehmann. During a lecture at the Holocaust Centre, Dr Ehmann mentioned Fischer's research amongst the Rehoboth Basters. After the talk, Ute told her that she was born on a farm next to Rehoboth. Dr Ehmann recommended that she read Fischer's 1913 Rehoboth ethnography, but Ute found nothing controversial or untoward in the book. It seemed to her to be packed with dull scientific data and measurements of Baster bodies. It was only when she read one of Dr Ehmann's publications on Fischer's infamous career that she began to realise who this kind old man that she typed letters to really was.

My search for traces of the Robinski family in Washington DC, Berlin and Williston kept leading me back to Fischer, and now it had taken me to Ute, the woman who had typed letters to this notorious Nazi scientist. But Ute was reluctant to be interviewed on film about Dr Rust and Dr Fischer. She did not wish to antagonise family members who were sensitive about drawing any links between German South West Africa and Nazism. She had already upset her gentile, German-speaking family when she had married a rabbi from

Israel. I received the following email from her in response to my request for a film interview:

> 6 March 2013
> Dear Steven
> The conversation with you today sent me into a kind of turmoil. It is delicate… Therefore I need more time to build up trust in order to be prepared to do a recorded interview as you envisage. I would bare my soul to you, perhaps at the expense of people who are dear to me. I have a feeling that you understand.
> Warm regards
> Ute

Once we got to know each other better, she agreed to be interviewed on film. Ute soon became the translator of the letters, and through this process she also became my guide into the black hole of silence. Ute's assistance with the Robinski letters went well beyond translation. She became for me the interpreter of the hidden transcripts, of things that could not be openly stated. She also became the mediator for my access to the emotional undercurrents pulsing through these cautiously worded letters. In a filmed interview with Ute in 2013 at her flat in Vredehoek in Cape Town, she told me how shaken she had been upon discovering for the first time the linguistic signs of the terrifying reality that lay beneath my grandmother's often quite innocuous words, phrases and sentences. This was the start of my own induction into the interpretation of the letters.

***

The Kreuzberg Museum in Berlin offered to help with transcribing the Gothic script of the letters into standard modern German. Once this was completed Ute was able to start translating the letters into English. The first translation I received from Ute, on 30 March 2013, was of a Tafellied, a celebratory song for the occasion of the wedding that took place in Berlin in 1934 between my father's older brother Siegfried Robinski and Edith Urbanski ('Edith II' as she is referred to in the letters, to distinguish her from my father's younger sister Edith). Ute provided two versions of the Tafellied, what she called a poetic translation and a direct translation. The language of the anonymous Tafellied composer, even in translation into English, comes across as sophisticated and playful. At first I could not work out who all the other personalities in the Tafellied were but I later began to slowly piece together this family picture:

Tafellied

Your attention, people dear
Tidings we will bring you here
Do be seated first and hear
Wake your senses, prick your ear.
Here, there, everywhere
Marriage, that's what is done
A call there sounds to everyone
To marry above all else.

But Siegfried did not want to [marry]
Shrewd since boyhood
Now and then he'd find
For himself a girl as friend.

Freedom! This was his ideal
Here and there and sometimes yonder
To Schreter's to play "skat"[20] *he'd wander*
An alibi he always had.

It happened suddenly one day
To this confirmed bachelor
The way it came about
These verses here will say.

Whilst he with much dexterity
Dyed buttons, [21] *his eyes suddenly*
Fell on Edith[22] *and he stared*
And all the buttons turned to red.

The moment this occurred
All resolutions became blurred
Forgotten, as he lost his heart
Chose Edith straight'way from the start

Now have a look at this Chochem[23]
Turned husband on this very day
And Edith as his lovely wife
Fulfilled the yearning of her life.

And Edith too from her first glance
With Siegfried was forthwith entranced.
Said: 'Bet you thalers thousand
This boy I'll take to be my spouse'…

---

[20] Siegfried would play the card game *skat* at the apartment of his friend Schreter.
[21] Siegfried was an industrial worker in factory that manufactured buttons.
[22] Siegfried married Edith Urbanski, referred to in the letters as "Edith II".
[23] Yiddish for *Chacham*. Mischievious, naughty person.

Siegfried comes across in the Tafellied as a happy-go-lucky, debonair and dapper young man. The Tafellied also reveals that he is an industrial worker in a factory manufacturing buttons. This first translation turned out to be the most celebratory of all the translations I was to receive from Ute. By the time of the marriage in 1934, the long black night of fear and terror had already begun. My father had been arrested a year earlier in Erfurt and the Nazis were stamping their power and authority on every aspect of German life. Ute probably chose to send me this translation of the *Tafellied* as a gentle entry into this frightening world. Perhaps she wanted to start off with a lighter moment.

Ute translated another letter that had an equally playful and breezy tone. Correspondence from Grete Frankel to my father in South Africa provides surprising insights into the cosmopolitan cultural character of a pre-war Europe, a world from which my father had only recently fled. Grete writes to my father from Prague on 18 July 1936 to thank him for his farewell letter. She describes her holiday travels in Czechoslovakia and portrays a thriving Jewish cultural life in Prague at a time when it was possible for a young Jewish woman to travel freely and enjoy the city's tourist attractions. The tone of the letter is at times frivolous and flighty, and I initially found it strange that it was possible to write like this in such dark times. But of course the letter was written before the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia.

Prague, 18 July 1936

Dear Robi (Mr Robi does not sound so good)

I was truly pleased about your[24] *farewell greetings which were sent to me from Prague, especially as I had not expected them at all. Therefore you should also receive a prompt reply.*

You are demanding a detailed travelogue, this is difficult. Where to start first? The trip became interesting from Dresden onwards, firstly because of very nice fellow travellers (Italians) and secondly because the scenery became very beautiful. The train travelled along the Elbe and one had a most beautiful view of the mountain range of sandstone. (I think this is the correct name for it, we call it "Saxonian Switzerland"). At the station I was embraced by my uncle, beaming joyfully, although he first had to ask me whether I was indeed Miss Fränkel, as he had not seen me for many years…

Meanwhile many warm greetings

Your Grete F.

[24] Grete Frankel uses the German formal, 'polite' form, in all her letters to Artur.

Five days later, on 23 July, 1936, Grete responds to my father's letter. Again, the letter is peppered with playful banter. Grete comments, *"In the previous century one wrote letters about stars, moonlight, flowers etc.; the modern girl of 1936 writes about food."* She jests with my father about his previous letter in which he playfully dabbled in deciphering her character from her handwriting. She also tells him about her visits to the old Jewish synagogue and cemetery in Prague, as well as a swimming pool where Jewish sportsmen regularly win the local swimming competitions.

Prague, 23 July, 1936

Dear Robi, auspicious colleague of Raphel S.!

I have made an effort to enrich my knowledge and have viewed further places of interest. Thus I saw the old synagogue of Prague yesterday, which is over 1000 years old and I also visited the old Jewish cemetery, on which the graves at the time were arranged in layers because of lack of space, and I also saw the tombstone of the old Rabbi Löw (of course you know the tale of the Golem)… The other day I swam in the Moldau. There are many swimming pools here [and] swimming competitions often take place at which many Jewish sportsmen participate, and win most of the time… On Sunday morning I will travel to Marienbad, I will then inform you of my new address.

Meanwhile I remain

With many warm wishes

Your Grete Fränkel

Reading these letters, it is as if Hitler's rise to power three years earlier is the farthest thing from Grete's mind. Yet, I cannot read her correspondence without thinking about the dark clouds gathering over Europe.

Grete Fränkel's letters were followed by Ute's translations of the correspondence from the Robinski family in Berlin. One of the earliest of these translations was an unsigned and undated letter addressed to my father. The letter must have been sent after October 1938 as it notes that Artur is already settled in Northern Rhodesia. The translation arrived in my email mailbox on 31 March 2013:

Dear Herbert,

From Artur I received the information yesterday that permission to immigrate as a typist was declined, which is due to the general anxiety regarding refugees [in Northern Rhodesia]. A. wants to try again for a position as "house helper", but also here one has to predict a negative

result. I do not know what to do. The need to emigrate is pressing, as far as rumours are reliable. So no time is to be lost anymore, on the other hand, I would like to circumvent the issue of marriage, because I presume that I will have to wait for two years until completion of the transaction, or is this not necessary?

It will be the best if I went to England for the time being, to do household work. If I would obtain a position there, I would come out soon, but I do not know whether Herbert [Reisner] will be successful, I will write to him today. Perhaps I could obtain a position pro forma, because once in the country, I would find something, there are enough jobs there.

I have unfortunately only now taken the initiative… There are difficulties to be expected, also in Rhodesia, but I will attempt to find temporary employment there. I hope I will succeed. From my colleague I can report to you that he had a position in Cape Town as cantor and [Hebrew] teacher, but that he was not granted permission by the government. On this one can therefore not place any hope. It is difficult today to get accommodated anywhere.

This letter made me realise that what was to follow was going to be of a very different tone and tenor to the witty and jovial *Tafellied* and the romantic missives from Grete Fränkel in Prague. The one was from my father's sister Edith. At last I could hear the voice of the young woman in the photograph.

The short sentence '*It is difficult today to get accommodated anywhere*' reveals a level of desperation that comes to permeate Edith's letters. It is quite possible that this letter to my father was written after Kristallnacht on 9 November, when the persecution of Jews became even more terrifying than before. She informs my father that she is hesitant to wait any longer for the arranged marriage that my father and Artur are trying to organise with a man in Northern Rhodesia. Edith's words betray a growing sense of despair and hopelessness. She has learnt that a cantor and Hebrew teacher that she knows from Germany had been denied entry into Northern Rhodesia, even though he had a job waiting for him there. So what chance did she have? She contemplates opportunities of work as a typist or a housekeeper, in South Africa, England, anywhere.

Ute's translations began arriving in my email mailbox on a regular basis. Ute found it especially heart-wrenching translating my grandmother's letters to her sons in Africa. Her letters reveal my grandmother's desperation to protect her family. They also reveal her determination to remain optimistic and cheerful despite the dreadful omens. In the weeks

that followed, Ute would send me translations on Thursdays or Fridays. She would often apologise for having to send me such agonizing messages from the past. She was worried about the effect the letters would have on me.

In an email sent on 19 April 2013, Ute wrote, "I have translated two more letters, wanted to hold them back because I wanted you to enjoy Shabbat. But o.k., I will send them to you now." A few days later, she told me that she wanted to meet to talk about the two letters she had translated the previous evening. Over lunch at the Cape Town Holocaust Centre café, Ute suggested that I join the Legacy Forum, a Cape Town-based organisation for second-generation survivors. She said that psychoanalysts believe that second-generation Holocaust survivors carry inside themselves a black box of unconscious emotions and traumatic memories inherited from their parents. On 2 May 2013, she ended her email with the words: "Wishing you, your wife and family Shabbat Shalom and much strength when reading these letters".

I may have such a black box of unconscious emotions and memories, but I seem to have done a good job of keeping its lid tightly shut for most of my life. Yet, as I read and reread the letters from my grandmother and Aunt Edith, I opened myself up to the contents of this box. These letters pulled me back into a world of ghosts and shadows. It was as if the flow of linear time was disrupted and the past was leaking uncontrollably into my present.

***

On 21 July 2013, while standing in front of my uncle Artur's tombstone at his late wife Elsa's consecration at the Jewish Cemetery in Pinelands, Cape Town, my thoughts kept returning to a letter that I had recently read. Written in 1939 by Cecilie to my father, the letter conveyed my grandmother's excitement and relief that Artur was about to be engaged to a woman called Edith - perhaps we should call her Edith III. Edith Glatter, a girlfriend of Artur's from Germany, was now living in Salisbury in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). Artur had fled Berlin a year earlier, and his mother had been worried about him being on his own in Ndola in Northern Rhodesia. The prospect of her youngest son settling down and getting married to German Jewish woman would have reassured her that he would be all right for her sons in Africa.

Berlin, 28.7.39

My dear Herbi! … Yesterday we received the news from dear Artur that he has got engaged and that he is a happy bridegroom, we congratulate him heartily on this move and wish that he will find his yearned-for happiness by the side of his chosen one. So he has outdone you; but luck will also blossom for you…

Artur in Ndola with his two children David and Cecilia

But this marriage never materialised. In a letter sent from Salisbury on 29 September, Edith Glatter writes to Artur to tell him that she is engaged and about to be married to another man. She bluntly informs him: *"We have to forget any future plans."* Standing in front of Artur's tombstone in 2013, I could not help thinking how devastating this letter must have been, both for Artur and for his mother.

Artur eventually recovered from being ditched by Edith Glatter, and married Elsa Benatar, a Jewish woman whose Sephardic family had lived in Alexandria in Egypt before moving southwards to the Congo. Artur and Elsa settled in Ndola in Northern Rhodesia and raised two children, my cousins David and Cecilia. My memories of Artur are of a gregarious and witty man with wild strands of grey hair, a large nose, and sparkling eyes. His mischievous sense of humour was often quite dark and offbeat. When he discovered that I didn't eat red meat, he told me in a deadpan tone that Hitler was also a vegetarian. To this day I am not quite sure what he meant by this. Perhaps he was implying that one cannot depend on vegetarians to be kind to humans. I later learnt that Hitler took to vegetarianism because of a particularly bad problem with body odour.

As a student at the University of Cape Town I would regularly go to Artur and Elsa's Beach Road, Sea Point flat for Shabbat dinner on Friday nights. They lived on the 9th floor and I would soak up the panoramic balcony views onto the beachfront promenade and the Atlantic Ocean. I would sometimes stare pensively at Mandela's Robben Island prison. This was the early 1980s, the country was up in flames and I was living in Observatory, a drab, mostly student and white working-class suburb on the other side of Table Mountain. My dilapidated bohemian student house had no sea views or vistas.

Being a Sephardic Jew, and having grown up in Alexandria, meant that Elsa had a multi-cultural family background that impressed me as an anthropologist. She spoke Ladino, French, Italian and Spanish, and told fascinating stories about growing up in the cosmopolitan port town of Alexandria. She was a lively and generous woman who paced about the flat with a determined gait. She also had a spirited and wry sense of humour. Elsa and my mother did not get on from the moment they set eyes upon each other. To make matters worse, Artur could not refrain from teasing my ultra-sensitive mother. This meant that relations between my mother and Artur's family were strained from the start. I later learnt that Artur's children felt that, whenever they visited Port Elizabeth from Ndola, they were treated shabbily by my mother. They were convinced that my mother treated them as the poor, second-class relatives from deepest and darkest Africa.

My mother was a snob and she loved nothing better than mingling with millionaires and well-to-do folk. From a young age she had been determined to escape the working-class Port Elizabeth neighbourhood of South End - a predominantly Coloured area until the apartheid-era forced removals of the 1960s. After marrying my father she managed to swiftly insinuate herself into Port Elizabeth's Jewish high society. From the beginning, she felt that the Ndola relatives did not fit in with her charmed inner circle of affluent PE Jews; a lifelong family feud had begun, one that lasted almost fifty years. This only intensified when Artur and his family moved to Cape Town in the 1970s. Although I visited their beachfront flat in Sea Point regularly for Friday-night Shabbat dinners, I was of course completely unaware of the one hundred letters in the plastic bag in the cupboard in Aunt Elsa's bedroom. Aunt Elsa's death in August 2012 was the catalyst for the discovery of the letters, and for the visitation by the family ghosts from Berlin.

After Elsa's consecration, I drove my wife and two boys along Beach Road in Sea Point on route to lunch at my cousin Cecelia's home. In the car, my wife and I had an explosive argument. The spectral world of Berlin was once again spilling over into my life. The argument began as we were reflecting on the consecration. Lauren, who is not Jewish, told me that she finds Jewish rituals of death far more meaningful than the Christian ones that she grew up with. The conversation then shifted to why she had not converted to Judaism, even though she supported our son Joshua having a bar mitzvah. She said that her reason for not wishing to convert was her deep discomfort with South African Jews' unquestioning loyalty towards Israel, regardless of its policies and military actions. I responded that the State of Israel is merely a blip on the horizon of a much longer history of Judaism, and that it would never have come into existence had it not been for the genocide.

And in any case, for me the most valuable aspect of Judaism was its cultural and intellectual legacies and not its religious, nationalistic and Zionist aspects. By then I had completely lost my composure and was spitting mad.

I had put a lot of effort into trying to hold onto an idea of a Judaism that was not tainted by Israel's historical occupation of Palestinian lands. Although I shared Lauren's criticism of Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, I rapidly lost any capacity for rational deliberation. Lauren then, unwittingly, plunged the knife deeper into the wound. She said that she had heard orthodox South African Jews claim that the Shoah was somehow part of God's plans for the creation of the State of Israel. This was a twisted lunatic fringe view, I screamed. By then the black box had been opened, and uncontained, unconscious emotional content was leaking out fast.

I later tried to reflect upon my outburst. Like Lauren, I too am profoundly offended by Zionist appropriations of the affective charge of the Shoah to justify Israel's actions. I too criticise Zionists who use and abuse this catastrophe for ideological purposes that deflect attention away from the suffering of Palestinians in the occupied territories. So, what was I doing lashing out at my wife for views that I largely shared? There was something quite raw and unconscious at play here. That afternoon, driving with my family through Sea Point, I was incapable of rational reflection or debate. All I could do was lash out at the woman closest to me.

The letters were becoming the conduit through which my father's family past was leaking into my world. It was as if through some unspoken sign I had delegated Ute the task of opening the black box on my behalf. Ute must have somehow known this because she immediately took on this role, without me ever having to ask. She entered a spectral world of ghosts and shadows that I had sought for so long to avoid. Ute read and translated these letters knowing full well the fate that awaited the letter writers. She led me gently by the hand as I cautiously peered over her shoulder into this dark pit. As I caught glimpses of the abyss, I prayed that I would not turn to stone.

NINE

ARTUR'S ESCAPE

Edith and Artur; I suspect the photograph was taken in Berlin in the mid-1930s. Artur's daughter Cecelia found the photograph in April 2014 while cleaning out her late mother Sea Point flat.

Immediately upon arriving in South Africa in 1936, my father set about trying to get his younger brother Artur out of Germany. A year later, with the passing of the 1937 Aliens Act, South Africa closed its doors to German Jewish refugees. Hitler's rise to power in 1933 had triggered a dramatic increase in German Jewish immigration to South Africa. This rapid influx was the catalyst for Afrikaner nationalists to intensify their lobbying of the Hertzog-Smuts government to end any further Jewish immigration.

Opposition to Jewish immigration also came from small rural towns such as Williston where Jews were seen to control local commerce. The economic successes and upward social mobility of immigrant Jews such as Eugen Robinski triggered resentment amongst poor white Afrikaners in these rural towns. Afrikaner nationalist politicians such as Malan and Verwoerd latched onto this growing antipathy, and increasingly caricatured Jews as the embodiment of an anti-social, parasitic and unpatriotic English and Jewish-controlled brand of international capitalism. The Nationalists were convinced that Afrikaners in these rural towns did not yet have the skills to compete with commercially savvy European Jews. They became determined to prevent Jews from retaining their grip over commerce and the professions; their solution was to end Jewish immigration.

Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd receiving a honourary PhD degree from Stellenbosch University, 7th March 1964.

In the mid-1930s, Hendrik Verwoerd was a Professor of Applied Psychology at Stellenbosch University. In 1936 he had accompanied five Stellenbosch professor colleagues as part of a delegation to the government to protest against the entry into South Africa of German Jewish refugees. On 1 October 1937, Verwoerd, then editor of the influential National Party newspaper, *Die Transvaler*, wrote an editorial entitled *"Die Joodse Vraagstuk Besien vanuit Die Nationale Standpunt"* (The Jewish Question from the Perspective of the National Position) in which he defended the introduction of stricter regulations against Jewish immigration. He insisted that "the [Afrikaner] Nationalist does not hate the Jews" but that there was a conflict between the two groups because Jews allied themselves with English and capitalist interests and were hostile to the political and economic aspirations of Afrikaners. Justifying the protests against the 1936 docking of the *Stuttgart* on the grounds that European Jews were unfair economic competition for poor white Afrikaners, he called for a tightening of immigration restrictions on Jews as well as restrictions on trading licences.[25] His lobbying with government was ultimately successful, and in the parliamentary debate on 14 January 1937, the National Party called for the prohibition of Jewish immigration, the withdrawal of Yiddish as a recognised European language for immigration purposes, the end to the naturalization of Jewish immigrants; the exclusion of Jews and other 'non-assimilable' races from certain professions and the prohibition of the changing of names. All of this was to be enacted retrospectively from 1 May 1930. The passing of the 1937 Aliens Act was Verwoerd's coup de grace.

As Afrikaner nationalist leaders began flexing their muscles, Jews were becoming increasingly fearful about their future in South Africa. The desperate situation of Jews in

[25] This section is based on the 1959 essay on Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd by Stanley Uys, the late former Sunday Times political correspondent.
http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page72308?oid=509259&sn=Marketingweb detail

Germany must have only heightened their anxieties. On 15 December 1937, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies wrote a letter to the leader of the National Party Dr D.F. Malan complaining that South African Jewish citizens "noted with deep regret and concern, the expressions of unfriendliness towards [Jews] which have been voiced by the leaders of the National Party, and in resolutions adopted at its conferences".[26] The Board went on to claim that the National Party was "embarking upon a policy of fostering ill-will against the Jewish citizens of the Union, and is aiming at discriminating between them and other South Africans". It noted that South African Jews "will protect and defend by every legitimate means their fair name, their honour and their full rights as citizens of the country". The letter concludes with a call for a meeting with the National Party leadership in order to enter into discussions with "the desire to maintain amicable relations". Verwoerd's editorial on "The Jewish Question" published two months earlier had, if anything, heightened the Board's fears about the "unfriendly" approach of the National Party towards the Jewish community.

Afrikaner historians such as Professor Hermann Giliomee vigorously deny that the architects of apartheid such as Eiselen and Verwoerd were in any way inspired by German racial science and Nazi ideology. Giliomee contends that these early Afrikaner nationalists and apartheid ideologues were largely influenced by US segregationist Jim Crow laws and the conservative theological interpretations of the Dutch Reformed Church. Giliomee has also denied that Volkekunde, the style of anthropology taught at Afrikaans-speaking universities such as Stellenbosch, was in any way influenced by German racial science. Notwithstanding Giliomee's determined denial of these influences, the South African historian Andrew Bank writes that the founding father of Volkekunde at Stellenbosch University, Werner Eiselen, was indeed strongly influenced by German imperial and missionary racial ideas.[27] During his doctoral studies training at Hamburg and Berlin Universities in the 1920s, Eiselen became a disciple of Carl Meinhof, a scholar of African language and religion who was steeped in German eugenics and who, in 1933, became a card-carrying Nazi.

Verwoerd's German connections were somewhat different to Eiselen. In 1959 the political correspondent Stanley Uys provided revealing insights into Verwoerd's wartime

---

[26] *South African Board of Deputies, 15 December 1937.*

[27] Andrew Bank, 2015 "Fathering *Volkekunde*: Race and Culture in the Ethnological Writings and Teachings of Werner Eiselen, Hamburg, Berlin and Stellenbosch Universities, 1921-1936". Paper presented at the Indexing the Human Seminar Series in the Department of Sociology & Social Anthropology, Stellenbosch University, 12 February, 2015.

past. By the time the war broke out, Verwoerd was already well known for his pro-German views. Mr Justice Millin, in a judgment delivered in the Transvaal Supreme Court on 13 July 1943 found that Verwoerd had supported German war propaganda and, as editor of the *Die Transvaler*, he had made his newspaper "a tool of the Nazis in South Africa". Verwoerd had taken the Johannesburg *Star* to court for publishing an article, entitled "Speaking Up for Hitler," in which the *Die Transvaler* was accused of falsifying news in support of German propaganda and thereby acting as an instrument of the enemy. Verwoerd lost the case. He was accused of causing alarm and despondency amongst the population through his pro-Nazi reporting, and thereby causing damage to "the war effort of the Union".

Here is a further extract from the court record:

MR. ROPER (for the defendants): "Here is a thoroughly defeatist article saying that the Germans are on the threshold of England, that it is imperative for Britain to make peace, and that these peace feelers are really inspired by her. Not a very comforting article for those not in your camp".

DR. VERWOERD: "It is not my business to comfort the English".

Verwoerd certainly did not see it as his business to comfort Jews.

Arriving in South Africa 1936, my father must have panicked about all of this pro-German support. Living in Port Elizabeth, he probably also knew about the 1934 court case involving three Greyshirt leaders and the Port Elizabeth Jewish community's Reverend Abraham Levy, no relative of Eugen's grandson Harold Levy. Reverend Levy had successfully sued the three Greyshirts for £1200 for defamation of character. The Greyshirts had claimed that they had acquired documents, allegedly stolen from Port Elizabeth's Western Road Synagogue, providing evidence of a Jewish conspiracy against Christians. The Greyshirt documents, which were allegedly signed by Reverend Levy, borrowed liberally from the infamous Tsarist Russian *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an anti-Semitic tract that claimed that Jews were secretly plotting to destroy Christianity and establish international Jewish dominance. Drawing on this discredited forgery, the Greyshirts asserted that they now had incontrovertible proof that Jews were anti-Christian, revolutionary Bolsheviks and unpatriotic international capitalists. One of documents claimed that the "Imperialism of Pax Judaica" would produce "the downfall of western

civilization" and that, just as the Jews now controlled Russia, they would soon also gain control of the Union of South Africa and hand it over to the "natives". [28] Focusing on Jewish purity and superiority, another even more bizarre document stated that "We are the pure people. The Nordics in our eyes are no different to the Chinese Dogs or the Turks. They are all destroyers, our enemies. The Christian Religion is wrong. Christ, in the Jewish sense, was a false prophet born of the womb of a foul bitch... In our Talmud Torah and other holy books it does say that the gentiles will be made to drink the Piss and eat the dung of the JEWS… (p.5 of Judgement). Reverend Levy ultimately won his defamation case and the documents were declared forgeries. But I wonder what my father felt, having fled Nazi Germany, only to discover that a vocal section of white South African society shared Hitler's passion for anti-Semitism.

The 1937 Aliens Act meant that Artur could not get a residence permit to stay in South Africa. But my father somehow succeeded in getting Artur a job offer as a storeman in Bulawayo in Southern Rhodesia. When Artur received a letter from Rhodesian Agencies Ltd in 1938 offering him the job he must have been ecstatic. This letter was his lifeline, and Africa was to be his place of refuge.

17th May 1938

Artur Robinski, Esq.
Wallnertheaterstr. 45
Berlin 027
Dear Mr. Robinski,

We refer to the conversation we had with Mr. H.L. Robinski of Port Elizabeth and which confirm as follows:

Upon your arrival in Bulawayo you are to join our firm in the capacity of a storeman. You will have to take charge of the entire store and despatch and to keep monthly records. We are prepared to pay you a salary of six pounds per month board and lodging found. It is understood that, after being acquainted with the conditions prevailing in this country, you will join our sales staff as a commercial traveller. Your remuneration will be fixed on the lines usually observed.

Please oblige and advise us immediately at which date you presume to be able to commence your duties…

---

[28] Mendelsohn and Shain, 2008, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History*, p.108-9.

Leaving Berlin for an uncertain future in Africa was not going to be easy for Artur. He was about to leave everything behind. He could not have known whether he would ever return to his home, friends and family.

Artur arrived in Cape Town in September 1938. Although he had escaped Germany, his problems were far from over. He had been given a temporary visa and, in two months he would have to leave for Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). In a letter written from Port Elizabeth to his former colleagues in Berlin on 30 October 1938, Artur conveys his mixed feelings about his predicament. He is ecstatic about his new found freedom and the excitement of travelling to new places; but his future remains uncertain. He is enthralled by the majestic beauty of Cape Town, where the ship had docked for two days before proceeding to Port Elizabeth, where his older brother Herbert now lives. Artur provides his Berlin colleagues with detailed reports on his adventurous sea journey from Hamburg, via Cape Town, to Port Elizabeth. By his exhilaration is curbed by his fears about what will happen to his family back in Berlin. He also is full of trepidation about the future of Jews in South Africa. Despite all of these worries, his letters are full of astute observations and witty banter.

1 Westbourne Road
Port Elizabeth
30 – 10 - 1938

Dear Sirs

After I failed to comply with my writing obligations for such a long time, I have set aside this day to send you a little report, straight from the African wilderness.

It is now three weeks since I arrived in this country and I have assimilated very quickly, to the extent that I regard myself as an African. I use the English "hello" for greetings and I do not anymore feel the urge to shake hands. I have virtually forgotten this weird German custom, and, now my hands simply belong to my pockets and if I had more hands, then I would require more pockets! I am no longer surprised when a black young girl serves me my dinner, as there are only black housekeepers here. I also no longer find it strange when the ladies go to cinema on Saturday night, dressed in long evening dresses and silver shoes, and the gentlemen appear in their smoking [suits]. Everything is so natural for an African. I should not forget to tell you that I am feeling the cold like the others, even when the sun is shining. It is still

winter here, you know, and whilst I am writing this, my legs are frozen. I am most delighted by this fact, for the heat was one of my biggest worries.

Artur bubbles with excitement about what he sees in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth:

… For two days the ship has been anchored in Cape Town – the second most beautiful city after Rio – but I saw little of it because of the rain, which washed away the differences between Berlin and Cape Town. The pavements are in both cases equally slippery and so I spent my time doing the usual – eating and drinking, tea and cinema, which here is large and elegantly furbished. After a further 24 hours of coastal journey by sea, I arrived here [in PE], to commence a new chapter of my adventurous journey

… Here in P.E. they have hotels eight storeys in height! About this city, I can only sing my praises. Life here is really great, because, firstly, the climate is very good and a strong breeze always blows. The surrounding is ideal for parties and the sea is, so to speak, situated directly on your doorstep. One can drive to the beach in a bathing suit and, if one finds parking, one can jump directly from the car into the water. There are beautiful, well-tended parks in African style, with small ponds, which during the holiday season are suffused with a magical light, the most modern street lights, that light up the beach at night. There is a modern harbour and big shops with hyper-modern designs, with escalators etc. It has the latest London busses, and cars as numerous as sand on the beach… All of this could make one forget that one is on the opposite side of the world, in the midst of the African wilderness. There are also many industries, shoe factories, chocolate and car factories. Ford and Chevrolet have their own factories here, and the car market, mostly American, is enormous. Among these one will often see the small DKW's which over here cost over £200. Among the local emigrants there are only a few, who do not drive big American cars, whose price is about £300. Of course, nobody pays cash and the whole economy is based on credit. However, on the whole, earnings are good one does not conduct business simply for its own sake.

Despite his euphoria about his escape and what he sees on his travels, he is brought down to earth by the South African immigration officials' refusal to grant him permanent residence. Soon he will have to leave Port Elizabeth and make his way to the small Copperbelt town of Ndola in Northern Rhodesia.

…We were anchored at sea before docking in Port Elizabeth because the ship was unable to enter the harbour, as there was no room. And when I saw before me the city, which would perhaps become my new home, stretched out, with tall houses, amidst lush green surroundings, like a little New York – everything that I had been suppressing for months broke forth in me. This intensely happy feeling of freedom [and] the joy of the reunion [with my brother], and the satisfaction following my anxious desire to begin a new life….
Another little worry of mine was whether, and in what way, I would be permitted to enter the country, and I want to tell you about this now. After 18 days of uninterrupted travel by boat, we sighted Cape Town, where the general customs clearance for immigration for the entire Union takes place. The uncertainty whether everything would be successful did not permit me to indulge in a holiday mood and I forced myself to feel as detached as possible under the circumstances. Upon my arrival in Cape Town I had received a letter from my brother, telling me that he had had a word with the immigration officials and that I was not to worry, and I was happy about this and headed straight to the court, armed with £ 1, in order to procure the much needed permit. But nothing came of that. The official had indeed been aware of my existence, but after I could only reply with "sorry" to his many questions about my financial situation, I could not get the permit. He told me that I would be obliged to pay £50 - upon my arrival in P. E. [Port Elizabeth], and I would then be able to obtain a permit for the duration of two months. And only after my brother here paid the amount, was I allowed to disembark from the ship. Here you can get anything with money and had my brother been in Cape Town, everything would have been easier and probably also cheaper.

Artur is also a fine observer of South African life. He describes in detail, and with a certain degree of parody, the 1938 centenary celebrations of the Voortrekker's Great Trek.

I will remain here for a further 14 days to continue with my English studies which I have already started. This is most important and I have drawn up a timetable, for which I have reserved four hours daily for studying. Whilst we have a wonderful weather outside, I sit inside and listen occasionally to radio stories, prayers – which form a large component of the programmes and news reports. These radio programmes are of great value to me, for they allow me gradually to acquire the sound and rhythm of the language. The English here is not too good because Afrikaans is mostly spoken by the Boers, i.e. the formerly Dutch people. In the

> *coming weeks, a huge celebration will take place, to commemorate the great journey which the Boers undertook with their ox wagons in 1838 in search of new land and to establish farms. So ox wagons will be driven along the same roads as part of the centenary celebrations. Because these people, called Voortrekkers, once had long beards, in commemoration the Dutch [Afrikaners] will also grow beards, which looks ludicrous. The English people seem quite tolerant of this….*

Artur seems to find these celebratory events strange and quaint, but he also detects signs of ominous undercurrents in these exuberant displays of Afrikaner nationalism. Artur arrived in South Africa at a time when the "Jewish Question" and the perceived threat of Jewish domination was at the centre of National Party campaigns for the 1938 general election. Meanwhile, leading National Party figures such as Eric Louw and D.F. Malan launched into attacks on Jews for being pro-English liberals and harbingers of "international Jewish communism". At the same time, they targeted Jews for being anti-Afrikaner capitalists and economic parasites responsible for sucking the blood of poor white Afrikaners.

The election year also witnessed the emergence of a new paramilitary fascist movement, the *Ossewabrandwag* (Oxwagon Sentinel), an organisation that emerged during the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek. *Ossewabrandwag* ideologues identified all sorts of Jewish conspiracies with the British, the Freemasons, imperialists and capitalists. The biggest threats to Afrikaners, they argued, were the political influence of Jewish money and Jews' disloyalty.[29] No wonder Artur drew parallels between what was happening in Germany and political developments in South Africa: *"Why not here [in South Africa]? The soil for this is fertile,"* he wrote to his Berlin colleagues in 1938. Given the dangers he sees looming on the horizon, he tells his colleagues that he feels fortunate to be leaving for Northern Rhodesia. Artur's reflections on what he saw in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth have an uncanny sense of foreboding. By 1941 the *Ossewabrandwag* claimed a membership of 300 000, including its paramilitary elite *Stormjaers.* A year earlier, Oswald Pirow, the former United Party minister of defence, had founded the pro-Nazi *Nuwe Order* - this was the same man who had visited Hitler at his Berghof in Berchtesgaten two weeks after Kristallnacht.[30]

---

[29] Mendelsohn and Shain, 2008, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History*, p.111.
[30] Mendelsohn and Shain, 2008, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History*, p.120-1.

Ossewabrandwag leader, Dr. Hans van Rensburg (centre) flanked by torch bearing members during a rally, 1941 (photographs from Richard Mendelsohn and Milton Shain, 2008, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History*. Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, p.107).

While Artur's letters to his colleagues reveal that he was impressed with South Africa's modern cities, industry and infrastructure, he was relieved to be moving to the small Copperbelt town of Ndola in Northern Rhodesia. His thoughts once again return to his family who remain trapped in Berlin.

> *Everything that was before lies far behind and I do not know whether others feel the same way as I do. But today I am unable to understand how people can still live in G.[Germany] And when someone asks me here, how the Jews actually live in G? then I do not know what to reply. I feel great sympathy for all those who still have to live there, submitted to all the pressures, afraid, after [reading] each sentence in a newspaper and listening to each speech and figure of speech, to hear whether this will bring new punishments. I am asked of the state of mind of the people who have to endure such a nerve wracking atmosphere and I do not know what to say to that. It just is to no avail…*

Artur's comment to his former colleagues: *"Everything that was before lies far behind… I am unable to understand how people can still live in [Germany]"*. He reveals here how utterly despairing he feels about Germany.

Artur's anxieties about the disturbing political undercurrents in South Africa in the election year of 1938 were perceptive. South African historian Saul Dubow notes that by the mid-1930s the ground was already prepared for the rise to power of right-wing Afrikaner

nationalism. By then the powerful Afrikaner secret society, the Broederbond, had been transformed into a Christian-national organisation with widespread influence in political, religious, business and educational institutions throughout the country. The Broederbond was dead against any form of *samesmelting* (amalgamation) between English and Afrikaners, and the Jews were understood to a special kind of problem precisely because they were perceived to be closely aligned with English capital. [31] The growing poor white population in the 1930s had created fertile ground for Broederbond ideologues to frame this problem as one brought about by an unholy alliance of English and Jewish capital. This ideological stance, with its echoes with Nazi political rhetoric, was reinforced by influential Afrikaner intellectuals such as Nico Diedrichs, Piet Meyer, Jeff Cronje and Hendrik Verwoerd, all of whom had returned from studies in Germany and Holland in the 1930s. It was this confluence of political and intellectual currents that fired the militancy of the Voortrekker Centenary celebrations that Artur observed with foreboding in Cape Town in 1938. These striking convergences between Nazism and Afrikaner nationalism in the mid-1930s made most South African Jews nervous. It was therefore not surprising that, in 1937, the Jewish Board of Deputies anxiously pleaded with Malan to meet to discuss the escalation of anti-Jewish sentiments. It was this toxic mix of right-wing Afrikaner nationalism and rising Anti-Semitism that Artur observed with such trepidation when he arrived in South Africa in 1938.

[31] Saul Dubow, Afrikaner Nationalism: Apartheid and the Conceptualization of 'Race'. *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 233, No. 2 (1992), pp. 209-237.

TEN

The noose tightens, 1938

With Artur safely out of Germany, my grandmother and my father turned their immediate attention to trying to help Edith and Siegfried to escape. The correspondence from Berlin tells the story of the family's ceaseless attempts to emigrate at a time when Nazi racial laws were relentlessly paring down their livelihood possibilities, citizenship rights and dignity. The letters oscillate between feelings of hope and despair. They are also about mundane daily activities such as birthday parties, religious festivals, card games, shopping for clothes, buying clothing material or a carpet, and visits of family members.

In a letter sent to Artur in London on 18 September 1938, barely a couple of weeks after he had left Germany, Cecilie writes,

Berlin 18. 9. 38

My dear boy! We have received your cherished postcard and we are pleased that you have landed happily in London. We are still expecting a more detailed letter in which you describe how you have survived your trip and what the farewell from the aunts was like… [Sending] the suitcase will probably cost 20 mark for freight and so 50 mark will remain for you as boarding money. Hopefully this will be adequate for you; because you will depart from England on the 22. 9. and will be in PE on the 10. 10. Thus a trip of 18 days. I had the money sent telegraphically and there were still charges of 3 mark. The main thing is everything is completed and may it all be for your luck and blessing. As the New Year festival will begin today in 8 days and you will not receive news from us prior to that, the next letter will follow [you] to Cape Town, so I want to send you today our warmest congratulations.

May the All-Merciful grant you everything of the best in the New Year, which brings with it a new phase in your life. May the All-Merciful grant you the best health and may He bless you with happiness and contentment. May He hear the prayers of your parents and be by your side on your life's paths so far away, that you may find the happiness, which your heart yearns for, in your new home. You can say a prayer on the ship; because I am sure that many Jews will be on that boat and there will be no lack of minyans.[32] *I have forgotten to give you a machzor*[33] *for your journey. Buy one in London in the Jewish Quarter. Pray for a good,*

[32] A *minyan* refers to the minimum number of Jewish men of bar mitzvah age that are required to have a religious service.

[33] A *machzor* is the Jewish prayer book for the High Holidays.

healthy and happy new year with heartfelt greetings and kisses from your loving parents and siblings. Once again, happy journey and a heartfelt farewell. Your portion is always left over after the meals. For me this still is like a dream. Your departure was too sudden, although we had been prepared for it and I am very glad to know that you will be sheltered there. Write to us often and also send our regards to your friend [masculine]. What happened with regard to the bride and the 1000 pounds? This is the last letter from Europe. The next one will be sent to Africa.

My grandmother comes across as extremely protective towards her youngest son. She is completely in charge of his financial and travel arrangements and expresses great concern about his health and spiritual welfare. Her injunction to Artur to pray on the ship, and her appeals to the "All-Merciful", reveal a religiosity that I had not expected. I had thought that my father came from a typical secular German Jewish family.

While translating the letters, Ute noticed that my grandmother was especially worried about Artur's well-being and routinely expressed her concern that he would be on his own in Northern Rhodesia. She refrained from burdening him with requests for help. It was up to my father to provide financial support and to rescue the family. As Ute put it, "Your father was under tremendous pressure. Your grandmother never asked anything of Artur. She would say, 'poor Artur' - so she was worried about him. But to your father she said, 'Send this one something for his birthday'. It's a command. She shares more with him, and she puts more pressure on him". This pressure on my father intensified as daily life for the Robinski family began to drastically deteriorate.

My father was under great pressure to rescue and financially support his family in Berlin at a time when he was struggling to make a living in a new country. This stress was later to take its toll on his health. The letters suggest that that by the end of 1938 the pressure became even greater. There seems to have been an unstated agreement that Edith and Siegfried were next in line to be rescued. But how was this to be achieved?

***

Cecilie and David Robinski, Berlin 1938

On the back of the postcard-size portrait of my grandparents is an inscription in my grandmother's handwriting: Berlin 10.II.38. I assume that the date is 10th February 1938. The photograph must have been sent to my father in Port Elizabeth. It was taken in the year when everything turned for the worse for the Robinski family, and for German Jews as a whole. My grandparents seem shell-shocked. My grandmother appears to have aged from the photograph taken of her with Edith and Hildegard a year earlier. David Robinski and his wife look defeated. By the time the photograph was taken, my grandparents had probably given up hope that they would succeed in escaping; the last loopholes to Jewish immigration into South Africa had been closed. A few months later, in September 1938, they would learn that Artur's application to stay in South Africa was turned down. Meanwhile Edith and Siegfried were trying against all odds to get into South Africa, Northern Rhodesia, or any other country that would give them refuge.

By 1938, Nazi racial laws were systematically stripping Jews of their citizenship rights and basic humanity. Yet, whenever Cecilie Robinski mentions these new racial ordinances in the letters, she says very little about the emotional toll they must have had on her and the rest of the family. This was probably because of her legitimate fears that the letters would be intercepted by Nazi censors. But it also reflects her stoic attitude and her reluctance to further burden her sons in Africa. In a letter dated 30 September 1938, Cecilie tells my father that "*as from tomorrow many Jews here are losing their livelihoods, the doctors are not allowed to practise, with a few exceptions, hawking and street market trade ceases and this continues all the time, slowly but surely*". She concludes the letter with the lament, "*Hopefully the Almighty will have mercy on us in the coming year and give us a little joy and contentment; so that it*

may be granted to the Jews to lead a worthy life as human beings". This is one of the very few occasions when Cecilie reveals her feelings about these daily onslaughts on the dignity and humanity of Germany's Jews.

***

It is widely believed that when Hitler came to power, many German Jews assumed that he would be a passing phenomenon. Many assumed that ordinary Germans and the political and military establishment would not tolerate this uncouth corporal and rabble-rouser for very long. They were to be proven horribly wrong as Hitler and his Nazis began to establish control over all state institutions and virtually every aspect of life in Germany. At the time of this photograph was taken, German Jews had already been subjected to over eighty racial laws. My father had been fortunate that during his imprisonment in Erfurt in 1933 he was forced confront the naked brutality of the Nazi regime; this catalysed him into action and he managed to escape three years later. Cecilie lived through the relentless intensification of this Nazi terror, yet most of her letters downplay the devastating emotional, psychological and economic effects that this must have had for her and the rest of the family in Berlin.

Following a barrage of anti-Semitic laws and bloody repression of political dissent, there had been something of a lull in anti-Jewish repression in 1936; the Olympic Games were held in Berlin, and Hitler did not want to draw too much negative international attention. The attack on Jews' rights and citizenship resumed between autumn 1936 and the spring of 1937. This period witnessed the Aryanization of Jewish firms and, in February 1937, the Nazis announced that that the key objective for the next four years was to completely eliminate Jews from German economic life. Yet, by January 1938 only 135,000 of Germany's 525,000 Jews had emigrated.[34] Over the next year, life for Jews was to dramatically deteriorate. By April 1938, only 40,000 businesses remained in Jewish hands out of 100,000 in 1933, and about half of all Jewish workers were unemployed. But the Nazis were of course not only concerned with diminishing Jews' involvement in the economy. From July onwards, all Jews, including infants, had to carry identity cards. In August 1938, all Jewish doctors were expelled from their profession, Jews could no longer own motor cars, and in October, Jews of Polish origin were expelled from Germany. The Robinski family survived these expulsions notwithstanding their Polish origins.

Then, on 7 November 1938, a young Jew of Polish origin assassinated a German official at the Paris embassy. This act was in retaliation against his parents' expulsion from

[34] Roseman, 2000:86.

Germany a month earlier. The Nazi leadership used this event to incite the notorious Kristallnacht pogroms. On the 9 November Jewish homes, public institutions, businesses and places of worship were razed to the ground by Nazi foot soldiers and members of the SA and SS. Shortly thereafter, young Jewish men were arrested and deported to camps such as Dachau. Living conditions in these camps were generally appalling and many Jews returned from their internment very ill. The historian Mark Roseman has described the experiences of young Jewish men who were deported to Dachau on 16 November.[35] The trains were overcrowded without lights or sanitary facilities, and the inmates had to get up at five in the morning to stand at attention for hours on end. They had to endure arduous labour, hunger and other horrors of daily life in the concentration camps. For thousands of Jewish men this was the most terrifying experience they had ever had in their lives. But there was much more to come.

In a letter sent to my father on 14th November 1938, a few days after the Kristallnacht pogroms, Cecilie writes: "Thank god that Artur has managed to get to Rhodesia legally… I am so happy that he is away from here, because you will have read in the newspapers about all that happened. We will have to follow soon." She had to be very cautious in her wording if she was to avoid jeopardizing the safety of herself and others. She nonetheless informs my father that "since Friday the Jewish community has been dissolved, and for the time being no [synagogue] service will take place." She then mentions, as if in passing, that "Herman Holz has been absent since Friday and Aunt Hildchen is quite heartbroken". In a later letter she writes: "Herman is in Sachsenhausen"; nothing more.

On the 28 November, Cecilie writes to my father to stress the urgency of "emigrating as soon as possible".

Berlin 28.11.38

My dear boy! We have received your dear lines of the 16.11 on the 26.11 and I can inform you that we are all, thank God, well, and I have not experienced anything bad. It would be very desirable, if we would also succeed in emigrating as soon as possible and you (plural) must try to submit an application on our behalf. Since dear father is above the age of 60, an application for him can probably not be made together with that of his wife. For young people it is probably easier to get into Rhodesia, and Artur must try to do his utmost for Siegfried. I have written a letter to Artur 3 days ago…Horst is in Dachau, if only the boy could manage to emigrate. The only question is: where. Little Jochim of the Urbanskis is

[35] Roseman (2000: 97)

> *going to Holland as many children can be accommodated there. Father's card club in the cafê has been dissolved and the skat players will now take turns in continuing their entertainment in the family home. Hilde is occupied with the school feeding scheme and is very happy there. She is earning 3 mark per week, and is very proud of that. Siegfried thank God looks very well, like a count, but has no employment. Perhaps Artur can organize a job for him as a dyer, colour remover for dresses and buttons. 14 days ago I sent you a single letter with Edith's photo. Have you received it? We spent my birthday in our intimate family circle, and only Mrs Urbanski was present. We spoke a lot about you and Artur …*

The four words "*Horst is in Dachau*" hide the terrifyingly brutal treatment of Jewish prisoners in the aftermath of Kristallnacht. I wonder if my grandmother and the rest of the family realised at the time what it meant to be sent to Dachau. Did they have full knowledge of what happened in these camps? This letter, written only two weeks after Kristallnacht, reveals a heightened sense of anxiety. Yet, to reassure her sons that the family is coping, she mentions that my grandfather's skat card games continue, even though they can no longer play at the café. Reference to the card games becomes a refrain in the letters to come. Even though she is trying to reassure her sons that the family is coping, my father and Artur must have feared the worst when reading these letters from hell.

Ute Ben Josef taught me to read between these lines. She told me that when she visited Sachsenhausen, many years after the war, she learnt that flimsily clothed Jewish men were made to stand at attention in the open for hours in freezing winter temperatures. These experiences must have been devastating. Men must have come back from these camps broken, sick and defeated. It is not surprising that Horst became very ill after returning from Dachau. I have no way of knowing what Horst told his family about his experiences in the camp. Perhaps he wanted to shield them from these traumatic memories. I wonder what my father told his own family when he returned from his imprisonment in Erfurt in 1933. Did he also try and shield them from what he had witnessed in those cells?

The year my father was imprisoned in Erfurt was also the year that Hitler appointed his favourite racial scientist, Dr Eugen Fischer, as rector of the Friedrich Wilhelm University (now Humboldt University). In 1929, Fischer had been appointed director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics. By 1938, with Hitler's unequivocal support, Fischer had become one of the most influential scientists in the Nazis' crusade to implement eugenics programmes such as euthanasia for the mentally

and physically disabled. By the early 1940s, Josef Mengele was sending the Institute eye specimens and blood samples of Roma and Sinti victims at Auschwitz.

***

The racial ordinances that my grandmother so cautious signals, prevented Jews from participating in public life, and they were increasingly confined to the privacy of their homes, Jewish communal organisations and synagogues. The streets and public spaces became ever more threatening. Cecilie's letters refer obliquely to the misery that resulted from these racial laws. She notes that Jews will be sent to "Jewish houses", they can no longer participate in the professions, they are to be expelled from the civil service, they cannot enter parks, and they must all take on the middle names of Israel and Sarah. Berlin's Jews were choking under these laws. As she was interpreting Cecilie's letters, Ute reflected on this systematic stripping down of Jews' sense of belonging and citizenship. She was shaken by the realization that Jews could not expect any respite or help from non-Jewish neighbours. "They are just by themselves", Ute remarked, "they only had each other, they had nobody else in this whole wide world willing to help them in any way". Ute imagined that they probably would have felt deeply grateful if someone on the street or in shop or bank was polite to them. But they had no reason to expect such basic courtesy or civility, 'They had to continue living among the German people who suddenly became alien to them, and they were aliens. This must have been a terrible shock'. It was in the minutiae of daily interactions that Jews recognised that they did not belong. This was the world that Cecilie lived and wrote from.

Ute could not help but think about this slow, steady suffocation when reading my grandmother's letters. It would not have been possible to fully comprehend the letters without taking cognizance of these lived realities. Ute observed a pattern whereby, whenever my grandmother alluded to a devastating new racial ordinance, she would reassure my father and Artur that the family was coping: "Then your grandmother says 'Yes, we're fine, we still have money. We've got some people who rent a room. And we are able to hold onto the house, although Jews have to now live together [in "Jewish houses"]. We can still stay in the house because the landlord is quite nice.'" What was also distressing to Ute was her growing realisation that "they live from day to day, in terrible fear, but they're scared to say anything to Herbert, they're scared that somebody will read their letter".

I wonder how my father and Artur deciphered the coded language and silences of these letters from Berlin. They were probably aware that their mother was desperately trying to depict a semblance of normality and coherent family life amidst the disintegration of social life. But they would also have known what was happening in Berlin from newspaper reports and radio broadcasts. They must also have been aware of the censors. My father's own experiences in Erfurt in 1933 must have provided him with a keen sense of the terrifying context within which these letters were written.

My grandmother's letters began to take its toll on Ute. She confided to me that, after a couple of weeks of translating them, "this whole tragedy gripped me very deeply". Sentences from my grandmother such as "*Horst is in Dachau… Herman is in Sachsenhausen, Katz is also gone,*" were especially shocking because Ute knew very well what this implied. She had visited Sachsenhausen, and she knew that, shortly after Kristallnacht, Jewish men were arrested and taken to camps where they were forced to stand for hours in the bitterly cold winter night with thin clothing. After dropping these one-line bombshells, my grandmother would often immediately switch to safer topics: the previous night's skat game, the cake she baked for a birthday, the Jewish festivals, or Edith's purchase of fabric to make a dress. The sudden switching between short, chilling sentences loaded with intimations of imminent danger and her mundane banter about cosy skat evenings saturated my grandmother's correspondence. But despite her courageous efforts to protect her sons in Africa, I am sure they must have detected the menacing signs of catastrophe hovering in the shadows.

Ute became increasingly unsettled by the letters. She recalled many sleepless nights when certain words, turns of phrase, disturbing sentences and cryptic allusions to imminent catastrophe would keep her awake. What was especially distressing was that she knew all too well what lay waiting beyond Cecilie's carefully constructed words and sentences. At the same time, Ute could only but admire my grandmother's steadfastness, fortitude, faith, and her refusal to abandon hope or complain about her predicament.

> Your grandmother always says, "Yes, we are well, thank goodness, we are all well" - and then she makes a little jump to something that shows it is not all well, "Our piano is going to be collected next week". So they had to sell the piano. To me they come across as very, very noble people, because there's never a complaint. They're always trying to be positive. They wish Herbie Happy Birthday and say, "Well maybe next year, please God, we will see each other". And then again [your

> grandmother says to your father], "I can't go and leave Hilda behind with strangers - Hilda who is not so intelligent, or she's got some mental problems probably. "But Herbie, maybe you can make a plan that she takes over Edith's Marriage Certificate". So, there is always still hope. Maybe we can do something… Your grandmother says she is going to stay with Hilda. She can't send her away, she can't let her go. To me this is like the opposite of what was happening in Germany. Here your grandparents remained and remained ethical. They said they can't leave Hilda. And so Hilda died in Auschwitz and they died in Riga…

For Ute, my grandmother was the Robinski family's rock of stability and hope. She also had to be practical and pragmatic one. She had to constantly strive to stitch together the fraying fabric of a family that was being violently torn apart.

Cecilie's refusal to complain may have been because she felt that everyone was suffering and her pain was neither unique nor worth dwelling upon. She probably realised that her role as the family's pillar of strength meant she could not afford to be vulnerable or buckle under the relentless pressure. Her ceaseless care and concern for the family is evident in her reports to my father about his older brother. She would write: Siegfried is coming for supper, his health has improved, he is playing cards tonight, he is learning to dye clothes to improve his immigration chances, he now has little chance of emigrating, and so on. Ute found it especially distressing that here was Siegfried, a charming, intellectual and very impractical young man, reduced to trying to learn how to dye clothes. Soon he would be trapped in slave labour, with all his prospects for life dwindling away daily.

With Ute's help, I gradually became quite adept at identifying the emotional undercurrents that lay beneath the surface of my grandmother's seemingly superficial banter. I learnt to detect signs of the extraordinary pressures my grandmother endured, silently and without complaint. But the deeper I immersed myself in these letters, the more worried Ute became about my well-being. At the same time, she still felt an obligation to help me see what lay behind my grandmother's ritualised reassurances and comforting refrains. During a conversation at her flat she spelt out her concerns about leading me along this path:

> I really felt, and I still feel, sorry for you. Because, you know, one always thinks of monuments and statistics and the six millions, but here were these people, Siegfried and your grandfather, who played skat once a week…. I did feel terribly sorry for

> you, because you would have read these letters. And it's you, it's your DNA, and it's your pain. I have read the work of a neurobiologist about [cross-generationally] transmitted trauma - and I thought that you have inherited that trauma… in a neurobiological manner. And I thought that you must be carrying terrible trauma just to read these letters….

Whenever Ute expressed such concerns, I would typically respond that she was in fact even more vulnerable than I was. I believed that my well-constructed emotional defences would protect me – Ute's walls could be more easily breached. When I told her that I probably inherited my father's capacity to keep disturbing feelings at bay, she said, "Remember, that's how he survived, so maybe it's a good thing".

I also suspected that reading the letters in the original German imbued them with a raw immediacy that was qualitatively different to the edited, if not sanitised and emotionally more distanced, English translations that I read. Having to read the affectively charged original German meant that Ute did not have the psychological protection of such linguistic barriers.

This linguistic immediacy became apparent to Ute almost as soon as she started translating the letters. She began to notice that Cecilie sometimes "turned around the sentences, almost in a Yiddish manner". This inversion of standard German sentence structure was often accompanied by "poor grammar", and Cecilie would also "get weaker in her expressions". Ute attributed this to stress and anxiety. But, not wishing to reveal my grandmother's vulnerability, Ute would sometimes edit out some of the more glaring signs of linguistic breakdown. As she said to me, "I often translate it the way she wants to say it, but not the way she says it, because I actually can't, because it would look as though she is naïve, and this would convey a wrong impression". Ute also noticed that Cecilie would typically quickly recover her linguistic composure, "She picks herself up again and writes quite normally. I can then see that her handwriting is very good". While Cecilie stoically sought to retain her composure, the situation in Berlin was systematically spiralling out of her control.

ELEVEN

THE BOOMERANG

> For the first time in history, the possibilities of the social sciences are made known, and at once it becomes possible both to protect life and to authorize a holocaust.[36]

During my visit to Williston in 2012 in search of traces of Eugen Robinski, I had stumbled across the footprint of the other Eugen. Like so many of my discoveries on this journey this encounter had an uncanny quality. It was on this visit that I learnt about the about how the Basters had been dispossessed of their land in the 1860s. They were living under the protection of the Rhennish missionaries at Amandelboom at the time. The missionaries ultimately failed to protect them from encroaching Trekboer pastoralists. In the mid-nineteenth century, competition over land and water resources was exacerbated by the expansion of wool farming. The Basters and Trekboers were largely livestock farmers who increasingly found themselves competing with wealthier white wool farmers who successfully lobbied the Cape colonial government to pass land laws that entrenched freehold title and ended up privatising the commons. The Land Beacons Act of 1865 marked the end of the road for the Baster pastoralists; they lost access to their grazing lands. Many of them moved northwards, eventually settling in 1870 in Rehoboth in German South West Africa. Three decades later, the German anatomist and physical anthropologist Dr Eugen Fischer arrived in Rehoboth to begin his ethnographic research on the Rehoboth Basters. The findings of his study were later to boomerang back to Germany with deadly consequences.

The German Jewish refugee and political theorist Hannah Arendt has provided a chilling account of how the Nama and Herero genocide in German South West Africa from 1904 to 1908 set the stage for what was to happen in Nazi Europe only a few decades later. David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen's *The Kaiser's Holocaust: Germany's Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism* tells this story in graphic detail. Fischer's study of the Rehoboth Basters is yet another terrifying illustration of this boomerang effect. It reveals how lethal scientific ideas incubated in the colonial laboratories of southern African made their way back to Europe.

---

[36] Giorgio Agamben, 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* p.10.

Left, Dr. Eugen Fischer looking at photographs of Rehoboth Basters from his 1908 study; right, Fischer as Rector of the Friedrich Wilhelm University (now Humboldt University) in Berlin after being appointed by Hitler in 1933;

The story begins with Fischer's arrival in Rehoboth in 1908 when he launched his anthropological study of 310 Rehoboth Basters, who were the offspring of white Boer and German fathers and "Hottentot" ("Coloured" or Nama) mothers. [37] He wanted to investigate the consequences of racial mixing as part of his scientific enquiry into the role of heredity in human evolution.

At the time, there were conflicting scientific views amongst German colonial officials in South West Africa and scientists about the cultural and biological consequences miscegenation. The historian George Steinmetz writes that in the early 1900s some scientists had argued that "mixed race" populations could become a genetically stable "new type", while others held the view that they would "remain 'in flux', expressing a mishmash of traits from both parent races, splitting into two opposing types, or reverting to one of the two ancestral genotypes".[38] German colonial officials were perturbed about all this racial and cultural instability and uncertainty about mixed-race peoples. This was why the Rehoboth Basters were the perfect population for Fischer to study. Meanwhile, German colonial officials wanted to know whether the "admixture of white blood" rendered the Basters more reliable and amenable to colonial rule, or whether their "in-between status" (*Zwitterstellung*) would make them more dangerous, unpredictable and troublesome. Fischer's study set out to clarify all of this uncertainty.

[37] This discussion of Fischer draws extensively from the work of Hans Walter Schmuhl and Annegret Ehmann. See A. Ehmann, (1998) 'From Colonial Racism to Nazi Population Policy: The Role of the So-called Mischlinge. In Michael Berenbaum and Abrahm J. Peck eds, *The Holocaust and History: The Known and the Unknown, the Disputed and the Reexamined.* Washington D.C. & Bloomington and Indianapolis: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Indiana University Press. Pp. 115-133.
[38] Steinmetz, George, 2007. *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa.* Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, p.217

During his four months in Rehoboth, Fischer measured the size, facial structure, nose, lips, ears, hair, eyelids and eye colour of 310 Rehobothers to find out, amongst other things, whether the interbreeding of peoples of different races would result in a "new type" of mixed-race *Mischlinge* (mulattoes). His investigations were motivated by both the rediscovery of Mendelian genetics in 1900 as well as the growing interest in "race-mixing" in the colonies and in Germany.[39]. He ultimately concluded that Khoikhoi and European features appeared in a myriad of possible combinations, and that the Rehobothers did not constitute a stable mixed race. Faced with the Baster's indeterminate genetic foundation, Fischer abandoned his initial eugenics research programme, and stressed the point that the Rehobothers had great value to the colonial administration as a *Mittelding* (literally an "intermediate thing"), an intermediate class between the Khoikhoi and the Boer.[40] Despite this political value to the German colony, Fischer relegated the Rehobothers to the biologically-determined category of natives who would forever be racially inferior to whites.

Fischer's identification of the Rehobothers as an intermediary class had significant implications for German colonial native policy. It also allowed the Rehobothers to benefit from certain privileges, as long as they knew their place in the colonial social hierarchy. In 1885 the Rehoboth Baster leadership signed a "Treaty of Protection and Friendship" with the German government that secured them privileged status and protection within the colonial regime as well as self-governing capability in Rehoboth. Steinmetz writes that for three decades of German colonial rule, this group of 2,500 Basters lived in Rehoboth as a "wedge" between the Ovaherero and the "Hottentots". In return for these privileges, they fought alongside German soldiers to suppress indigenous uprisings. According to Fischer, General von Trotha had "honoured the Basters" by allowing them to fight on the front lines during the "Herero campaign" of 1904.[41] Notwithstanding their privileged status, Basters continued to be targets of colonial panic about intermarriage. This was expressed in growing official concern that German men, and soldiers in particular, would marry Christian, Europeanised and Dutch-speaking Baster women. Officials were particularly worried that this would swell the numbers of *Mischlinge* (mulattoes) who qualified for German citizenship, and who could then move into European settler society. This sexual panic culminated in the 1906 decree banning mixed marriage in the colony.

By the time Fischer arrived in Rehoboth in 1908, the colonial settler population and officials had already imbibed popular eugenics ideas that racially mixed peoples were

---

[39] Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting*, p.233-4.
[40] [40] Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting*, p.234.
[41] Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting*, p.217-25.

politically unreliable, potentially dangerous, and subject to cultural degeneration and biological decay. Although the Rehobothers continued to be regarded as loyal and useful allies by officials, the possibility of a Baster rebellion was still a worry for the colonial state. Fischer's ethnography, entitled *The Bastards of Rehoboth and the Problem of Miscegenation in Man*, was published in 1913 to widespread acclaim. In the appendix Fischer provided practical recommendations for German colonial policy, including that the Basters be used as low-level officials, foremen and native police to shore up German colonial rule. He also recommended the maintenance of the ban on mixed marriages and racial miscegenation in the German colonies. This policy recommendation later influenced Nazi laws to promote "the protection of German blood and honour" through the Nazi Marriage Act of 1935 and what came to be known as the Nuremberg Laws. Two decades later, these laws forced my father to hide his relationships with gentile German girlfriends in Erfurt. But this was only the tip of the iceberg of racial science. There was much more to come. Fischer's study in the Rehoboth was later deployed to support eugenics claims that recessive genes of racially mixed populations led to physiological, psychological and intellectual degeneration. By the late 1930s, Fischer was one of Germany's most influential scientists, and his Institute in Berlin laid the scientific foundations for Nazi eugenics that was to find its ultimate expression in the Final Solution.

But Fischer's contribution to Nazi racial science was not straightforward. In 1933 he was at odds with the Nazi Party leadership because his scientific views on Jews did not line up neatly with official racial hygiene thinking. The reason for this was that he hesitated to categorically define the "Jewish races" as inferior. This was partly because of his claim that genetic material of some Jews contained "Nordic parts". As Hans-Walter Schmuhl writes, Fischer's categorisation of the Jews as a racial mixture, with Nordic and Oriental elements, resonated with his Rehoboth findings concerning the "exuberant growth of the bastards". These findings led him, in the early 1930s, to question a policy of stringent racial segregation with regard to the Jewish minority.[42] This minor disagreement with the Nazis did not prevent Fischer collaborating with them. He willingly compromised some of his scientific views as part of a Faustian bargain whereby he enthusiastically supported the Nazi eugenics policies aimed at enhancing the genetic health of the German nation. Such measures included euthanasia and sterilisation programmes to isolate "elements alien to the

[42] Hans-Walter Schmuhl, 2008, *The Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology , Human Heredity and Eugenics, 2927-1945: Crossing Boundaries*, p.231.

nation".[43] In Germany, the racially alien element was the Jew. Fischer spelt out this position in his first public address as rector of the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin on July 29, 1933. The address was entitled "The Concept of the Volkish State, Considered Biologically":

> That there are physical and intellectual differences no one can objectively deny. I am not pronouncing a value judgement when I declare this. I even go so far as to say that a nation mixed and crossed equally of Aryan and Jewish components could theoretically create a very credible culture, but it would never be the same as one that grew on purely German national soil; it would not be a German culture, but an entirely different, half-Oriental one.[44]

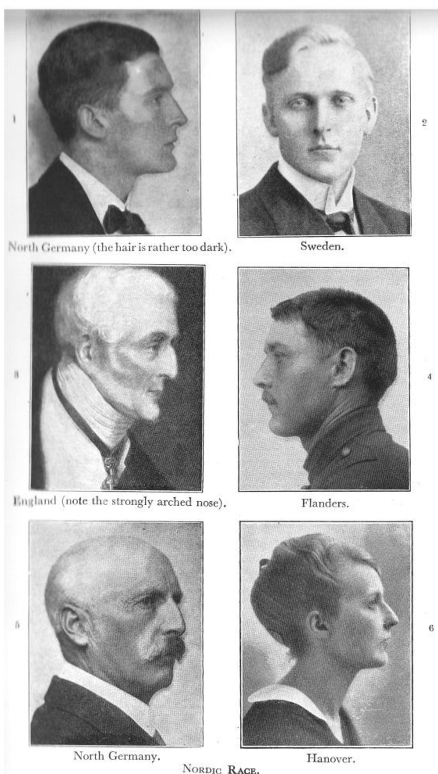
Fischer's scientific standpoint was not that Jews were necessarily inferior, but they were certainly different. This formulation allowed him to retain his earlier Rehoboth findings on the hybrid vigour of "mixed races" and simultaneously affirm his political commitment to Nazi racial policies targeting the Jewish minority. His position on Jews as a foreign body in the German volk led him to encourage researchers at his Institute in Berlin to play a central role in Nazi racial classification policies, including producing the notorious "genetic and race science certificates of descent". By doing this work for the Nazi state, Fischer and his colleagues lent scientific legitimacy to the Nazi eugenics project. In return, Fischer and his colleagues received all the support they needed from the Nazi state.

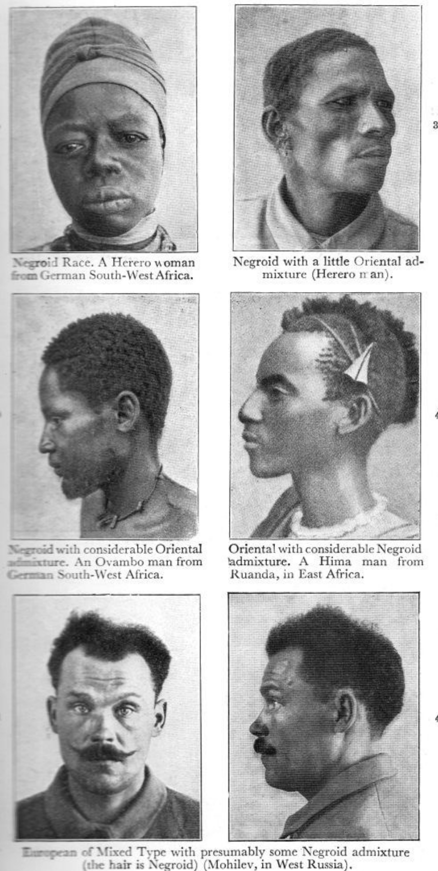
In 2013, I found a copy of Erwin Baur, Eugen Fischer and Fritz Lenz's *Human Heredity* in the Stellenbosch University Library.[45] Hitler had read the book while in prison in 1923 in Munich. By then it had become the standard text on German eugenics. Once it was translated into English in 1931, it became the bible for a burgeoning international eugenics movement. Fischer, who wrote Section Two of the book entitled "Racial Differences in Mankind", included anthropometric photographs of "racial types"' arranged in the sequence: Nordic, Alpine (Maritime Alps), Oriental, Mongoloid, and Negroid, ending with Fischer's Rehoboth photographs of "Cross-Breeds between Europeans and Hottentots in German South West Africa".[46] I am tempted to interpret the sombre expressions on the faces of the

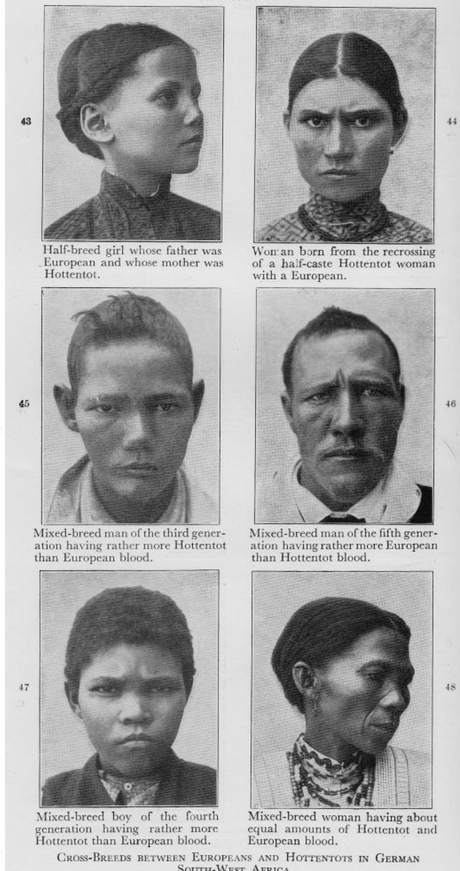
---

[43] Schmuhl, 2008, p. 231.
[44] Schmuhl, 2008, p. 134
[45] Erwin Baur, Eugen Fischer and Fritz Lenz 1931 *Human Heredity.* Translated by Eden & Cedar Paul. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd; New York: The MacMillan Company.
[46] Baur, Fischer and Lenz, p.192

Rehobothers photographed by Fischer as a reflection of their resentment and indignation at Fischer's cold, calculating and objectifying science; a science that classified them as *Mittelding*, "an intermediate thing". But this may not reflect what the Rehobothers themselves actually felt about this scientist from Germany. I can recall feeling contaminated simply touching the book, and I was relieved to return it to the university library. It had been borrowed eight times - it was issued four times in the 1950s, then again in 1963, 1980, 2000, and I took it out in 2013. I wondered what the other borrowers were looking for in this tainted bible of eugenics.







"Racial Types" in Baur, Fischer and Lenz's (1931)

There are striking similarities in the ways officials and scientists such as Fischer classified European Jews and Rehobothers. Because of the Basters' unstable, in-between status, German colonial officials had vacillated between viewing them as loyal subjects and potentially dangerous troublemakers. Jews in Europe occupied a similar intermediate position, although they were seldom seen to constitute a political threat. Like the Basters, Jews had also tried to overcome doubts about their loyalty by enlisting to fight the wars of their political masters. My grandfather fought for the Germans in the First World War only to become thoroughly disillusioned with the Kaiser's military adventures. The payback for his German loyalty was to be completely stripped of his citizenship and sent to his death in the forests of Riga.

South African Jews likewise had a history of trying to appease the authorities through displays of loyalty. Following the rise to power of the National Party in 1948, the majority of South African Jews, relieved that they were finally allowed to enter the white colonial laager, became acquiescent bystanders as apartheid gathered its grim momentum. Once they were firmly ensconced within the white fold, Jewish leaders and organisations such as the Jewish Board of Deputies displayed dutiful deference towards the ruling Afrikaner National Party; the same party whose leaders had once vigorously supported the Nazis and the German war effort. Fear generated in the face of this pro-Nazi support in the 1930s and 1940s led the mainstream Jewish leadership to ingratiate themselves to the National Party. Whereas Jews ultimately passed as white, this was not possible for the Basters who, despite their loyalty, were never allowed into the inner sanctum of German colonial society. As Fischer recommended, they were most suited to being deployed by the colonial state as an intermediate class between the European and the Khoikhoi as well as a wedge between the Herero and Ovambo on the one side and the Nama on the other.

Fischer's brand of eugenics was of course not a uniquely German invention. By the 1920s, eugenics was an international scientific movement with the United States as the leaders of the pack. The American eugenics movement, which emerged in 1880s, was largely derived from the ideas of the English scientist Sir Francis Galton. Galton, the younger half-cousin of Charles Darwin, had studied the English upper classes and concluded that their dominant social position was based on their inheritance of superior physical and mental characteristics. Galton's ideas were also influenced by his visit to southern Africa in 1850 when, for most of his visit, he had travelled on the back of an ox through the hot, dry and dusty interior of what is now Namibia. After he returned to London in 1852, his first-hand experiences of colonial rule and unbridled racism began to

influence his scientific thinking and, in 1853, he published his 300-page memoir *Narrative of an explorer in tropical South Africa.* Not for the first time, scientific ideas that had been incubated in the laboratories of a violent colonial frontier found their way back to Europe.

The South African historian Keith Breckenridge has written about how Galton's first-hand experiences of "native life" in South Africa in the 1850s, together with his observations on the condition of the urban poor in Britain, helped shape his new science of eugenics. Upon his return from southern Africa, Galton began to develop a science of empirical statistics that was used to investigate what he believed was the growing decline of "the better sorts". But his scientific programme was initially met with little popular enthusiasm or political interest. His fortunes began to change at the turn of the twentieth century following major British military setbacks against the Boers in the South African War. This, together with Booth's survey findings about the deleterious effects of poverty in London, began to provoke British public panic about physical and moral deterioration. It was in this context that Galton became the pioneer of a popular eugenics movement that lasted until the First World War.

Like many other eugenicists who were to follow him, Galton was concerned that the physically and intellectually inferior poor and working classes were having more children than the elites of the intellectual and professional classes. He believed that this would ultimately undermine Britain's national stock. These ideas circulated widely in Europe and North America in the early decades of the twentieth century at a time when the urban poor and lower classes were seen to constitute both a biological and political threat. By then, followers of Galton began baldly calling for drastic measures such as selective breeding, euthanasia and sterilization. In the United States, leaders of the eugenics movement such as Madison Grant stridently demanded restrictive immigration policies. They were determined to prevent inferior stock from Southern and Eastern Europeans from contaminating the superior Nordic, Germanic and Anglo-Saxon characteristics of West Europeans.

Notwithstanding the racist diatribes of some advocates of eugenics such as Madison Grant, by the 1920s it was already firmly established as a respectable science by US Ivy League universities, prestigious funding agencies, as well as within the US Congress. Influential organisations such as the US American Immigration Restriction League, along with allies such as the American Breeder's Association, successfully fought in Congress for the introduction of the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act that aimed to prevent the "inferior races" from entering the United States and compromising its national stock, namely upper

class Northerners of pure Anglo-Saxon heritage. Eugenicists such as H.H. Goddard, Charles Davenport and Madison Grant were key players in the eugenics movement in the United States. As early as 1912, Goddard had been invited by the US Public Health Service to use his intelligence tests to identify 'morons' amongst the arriving immigrants on Ellis Island. In fact, Goddard invented the term "moron" when he was director of research at the Vineland Institute for Feebleminded Girls and Boys in New Jersey. Drawing on his Ellis Island findings, he claimed to have solid scientific evidence that Jews, Russians, Hungarians and Italians were disproportionately predisposed to feeblemindedness.

Environmental and cultural factors had no place in Goddard's IQ tests, even though his subjects were mostly illiterate, spoke very little English, and had just disembarked from a gruelling sea journey. [47] Goddard's influential Ellis Island studies led a dramatic increase in deportations for mental deficiency. But this was not enough. Goddard believed that it would be far more efficient to restrict immigration from those countries "swarming with morons". A decade later he got what he wanted when immigration became based on national quotas. It is hardly surprising, then, that by the mid-1930s my father's family, who originated from Eastern Europe, stood virtually no chance of immigrating to the US. By then their chances of escaping to South Africa were equally bleak.

The common thread running through all this eugenics research was its fundamental hostility to the idea that what appeared to be innate hereditary traits were in fact profoundly shaped by environmental factors. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the German Jewish anthropologist Franz Boas, one of the founding figures of cultural anthropology in the US, insisted upon the importance of environment. It was Boas' brand of cultural anthropology, which he developed while teaching at Columbia University in the early decades of the twentieth century, that I imbibed when I did my doctoral studies at Columbia in the late 1980s. Boas questioned the basic assumptions of eugenics by emphasising the impact of the environment on physical, psychological and intellectual makeup. In one of his most important studies, he demonstrated that the cephalic index of second-generation Jews in the United States underwent significant changes that could be attributed to improved conditions in occupation, nutrition and climate. Although Boas ultimately won the scientific debate in the US, his questioning of the eugenics dogma that human traits were simply the product of biological inheritance was to prove impotent in the face of the rise of fascist ideology in Europe in the 1930s. My father's family were soon to become victims of this perverse new science of human improvement.

[47] Stephen Jay Gould, 'Science and Jewish Immigration,' in *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes.* Norton, 1983. p3.

TWELVE

EDITH'S WORLD AFTER KRISTALLNACHT

In April 2014 my cousin Cecelia found this photograph of Edith while cleaning up her late mother's flat.

Born in Culmsee (Brodnica, Poland) on 26 January 1915, Edith was barely 18 years old when Hitler came to power; she would have been 22 years old when she qualified as a teacher, and 24 years when the war broke out. As a young woman, she must have witnessed all her dreams fade before her eyes.

When I began this journey in Washington DC in 1996, all I knew about Edith came from a single studio photograph taken in 1937 and a couple of lines on the fate of the Robinski family in the *Berliner Gedenkbuch.* Then came the file from the Landesarchiv, followed by the discovery of the letters from Berlin in 2013. Suddenly, a window had opened onto Edith's world. From the letters I learnt that the photograph of Edith and her mother and sister was taken in the same year that Edith received her certificate of qualification to become a teacher in Jewish elementary schools. From a document found in my Aunt Elsa's flat, I now also know that she had trained for three years in Berlin. This document revealed that, on 12 March 1937, Edith was admitted to write an examination essay on the topic of "Fairy tale songs in the lowest four forms of elementary schools". On 23 September, she underwent the oral examination, which she passed, qualifying her as a teacher of Jewish elementary schools. This certificate, which was translated from the original German into English, must have been included, along with various testimonials, as part of her application to immigrate to South Africa. On 3 January 1939, the Jewish Congregation of Berlin

Department of Care for Juveniles in 2-4 Rosenstrasse provided the following positive testimonial for Edith.

3rd January 1939

Sworn Translation from German

EDITH ROBINSKI born on January 26th 1915, a German national, residing at 45, Wallnertheaterstr. [Berlin-Mitte], has been known to us for many years. She is a lady teacher who underwent her training and professional education at the Training Academy for Teachers at this place, and who is endowed with genuinely valuable features of character. Miss. ROBINSKI in her relations to the children proved to be highly reliable and efficient. She also displayed [these attributes] at the holiday camps of our congregation.

We are able to recommend her in every regard for a similar kind of work, requesting you hereby to let her enjoy your assistance in her efforts to the greatest possible extent.

Department caring for Juveniles and maintained by the Jewish Congregation

Englander

As a qualified teacher of music and religious instruction, Edith and her family must have thought that she stood a very good chance of emigrating, either to South Africa or Northern Rhodesia. In letter written to Artur on 30 November 1938, Edith updates him about progress in her efforts to emigrate. She also alludes to the profoundly unsettling unravelling of Jewish communal life.

Bln, 30.11.38

Dear Artur,
Thank you very much for your prompt letter. I have requested a testimonial report… If you could organize anything for me, no matter what, I would be very grateful to you. The community is dissolving and one does not know how long the school will continue to function. Besides that, a lot of children are going to England and Holland and so on.

Herbert's letter contained an invitation [of sponsorship), a very warm one at that, from Hetty. However, I can only get anywhere with an invitation officially certified there, and my

visit to P.E. must be authorized. Would you be so kind as to convey this to Herbert and at the same time to express by best regards and many thanks to Hetty.

Otherwise I am fine. It would be very good if Siegfried could also get out.

I hardly believe that my attempts will be successful but I want to leave no stone unturned. Today I will obtain the statement of non-objectionability ("Unbedenklicheitserklärung"). I hope that it will work. Otherwise there is nothing special to report. We are all well, only Norbert, uncle Hermann and Horst are still sick. Aunt Hulda will probably go to Bolivia.

Now I wish you all the best, have fun at your work, best greetings

Edith

The parents and Hildchen, Siegfried and Edith II also send their best regards.

PS. Should the employment contract not be possible, perhaps an authorized invitation to Rh. [Rhodesia], should P.E. no longer be possible.

The single sentence, '*The community is dissolving and one does not know how long the school will continue to function'*, is cautiously worded and can only allude to what must have been the devastating shockwaves of Kristallnacht only three weeks earlier. Edith's correspondence with both my father and Artur also reveals her mood swings between hope and despair. It is likely that the terror of Kristallnacht plunged her deeper into despair. The future of her teaching career is precariously poised as the numbers of Kindertransports increase, with most of the Jewish school children being sent to England and Holland. While Edith is relieved that the children are being rescued, she knows that this also means that she will soon be without a job. She is young, in her twenties, but she is not young enough to benefit from the Kindertransport rescue operations. She has had the dreams of her youth crushed, and now she is too old to be saved. She is caught in a grey zone between youth and adulthood. She is desperate to get out and is willing to do any kind of work, anywhere in the world. But she holds out little hope that she will be rescued. I can only imagine her anger, fear and despair. This could explain why some of the letters refer to the growing tension between Edith and my grandmother who, unlike her despairing daughter, was deeply religious and unrelenting in her faith and hope, even the darkest of hours.

On Christmas Day 1938, with the aftereffects of Kristallnacht still reverberating, my grandmother wrote to my father:

Berlin 25. 12. 38

My dear, good Herbi! Your cherished letter of the 16th of this month has just arrived and I want to reply to you immediately, as it is Christmas today and I have a bit more time to chat to you. My previous letters always were so curt due to time constraints, therefore I want to chat to you today more lengthily, which I love to do so much because then I get the feeling that you are together with me in person. You are exerting yourself so much on our behalf and you are attending to each one of our fates, which is really touching, particularly as Edith and Siegfried are a bit negligent with regard to their emigration. I am always thinking how much effort you made on behalf of Artur at the time, incessantly and in each of your letters, and how you took everything into consideration, until he succeeded at the last hour, thank God. Artur will probably have told you about Edith and how she sometimes suffers from feelings of inferiority and this also is her mood today. She just states that she knows nothing, neither Hebrew nor playing the piano and she does not want to work as a teacher; despite the fact that she is a good teacher. Write to her in the near future that she should accept a position as a teacher there, even if this is done under pretence, and that she has the biggest chance to get married there, that you have someone suitable for her. It is not impossible that she will make a good match there. She has developed to her advantage. Beautiful figure and also likeable; but she does not want to know anything regarding this…

Financially I am getting along for the time being. Should I need something at a later stage, I will come forward. The fact that Artur did not manage to remain in S.R. [Southern Rhodesia] is really very unpleasant and now he has transferred his residence to the 3rd place [Northern Rhodesia], and may it now be to his happiness and blessing.

Cecilie once again reveals her frustration about Edith's "nervousness" and asks my father to intervene. But Edith's moodiness, anxiety and despair are hardly surprising. By Christmas 1938, life must have been unbearable. Edith probably sensed that it was going to get much worse. My grandmother refuses to accept Edith's pessimism and despair about the terrifying darkness sweeping across Germany. Her faith and optimism blinds her to Edith's premonitions of what is coming.

The Christmas Day letter is full of fear and foreboding. My grandmother desperately tries to protect her children from the Nazi stranglehold that is suffocating the family by shepherding them into taking concrete steps to escape. But she is worried that Edith and Siegfried "*are a bit negligent with regard to their emigration*". She is grateful to my

father for all he did to rescue Artur, but now he has to turn his attention to rescuing Edith and Siegfried. Hildegard and my grandparents are further down the list.

In an undated letter to my father, Cecilie, rather uncharacteristically, expresses her feelings about what is unfolding around her. She is worried about the wellbeing of Artur, who is all on his own in Northern Rhodesia. She laments the dispersal of the Robinski family: *"Now the poor boy is so far away from everything and among entirely strange people. It is a hard lot for us Jews, all scattered far apart and also with an uncertain future. But we must have courage and hope for a good future"*. My grandmother then quickly changes the topic and updates my father about Edith's behaviour, *"Your reprimand has helped, she is behaving more decently now"*. I wonder what this means. Does Edith now feel obliged to mask her fears and despair? Why does my grandmother find it so unbearable for her daughter to articulate what all Jews must have been thinking and feeling?

In an undated letter, Edith tries to reassure my father that she is working on the immigration application process.

Dear Heppchen

Now you have once again put an entire year behind you and I hope this is not the only thing which you have put behind you. I specially wish you a continual good health and much happiness in all your undertakings. May the Goddess who is watching over the lottery show her gracious side! That would definitely not be a bad thing. Have a very pleasant day and also think a bit about us.

I have sent the transcripts of my [teacher reference] reports by airmail to Artur and would be very pleased if I could get there [i.e., Northern Rhodesia]. By the way, a colleague of mine who attended a seminar together with me has obtained a position as religious instructor and cantor in Cape Town. His name is Sabor, Rudi – as a result of this I presume that I do not have very many prospects, but perhaps it would still be possible. Do you have any news from Joe [Levy]? I am saving some money for the voyage, because, really, sometime somewhere something has to work out. Many teachers and also other girls have gone to England to work as housekeepers. This possibility still exists. Only it is better to first obtain a written invitation, as there is little prospect to get away by way of the [Jewish] Committees. Now I want to wait and see whether Artur perhaps achieves something through [Hans] Segal [in London] and meanwhile will try to suppress the "nervousness" which you mention in your letter.

Dear Heppchen, notwithstanding, everything of the best. Give my regards to Hetty [Levy] and thank her once again on my behalf.

My heartfelt congratulations and everything of the best

From Edith

When I first read this letter I was struck by the turn of phrase: "*May the Goddess who is watching over the lottery show her gracious side!*" If life is like a lottery, Edith was convinced that fortune was not on her side. But she tries hard to convince my father, and my grandmother, that she is doing her best to be positive. This undated letter must have been written after July 1938, when Artur was already settled in Northern Rhodesia. By then Edith must have known how difficult it would be to get into South Africa.

Edith needed good fortune, but instead her future looked increasingly bleak. She tells my father about a colleague of hers who was offered a job in Cape Town as religious instructor and cantor, a job she too had eyed. This only adds to her gloomy outlook. She tells my father that teachers and young girls are leaving for England to work as housekeepers - she hopes to find similar work in London, but she is doubtful that she will succeed. Despite her despair, she tries to reassure my father: "*Meanwhile, I will try to suppress the "nervousness" which you mention in your letter*".

***

1930s map of the area near Wallner-Theaterstraße in Berlin-Mitte where the Robinsky family lived

I have walked through the area in Mitte where Edith lived in a flat at Walnertheatrestr 45 together with her parents and sister. The building was entirely destroyed during the war and was replaced with modern high-rise flats. I have strolled through the streets she probably walked, and sat in cafés near where she lived. I have also spent time contemplating her world amidst the ruins of the Synagoge Heidereutergasse near Rosenstraße where she

once attended services. The more I have walked in her shadows, the more aware I have become of the barriers to what I can know about her. Notwithstanding these insurmountable gaps, I have learnt much from the letters. I now know that Edith and her family frequently visited the South African Consulate at Tiergarten, either to drop off documents or to find out whether their visa applications were successful. I also know that, despite diligently sending the required documentation to Pretoria, their applications were repeatedly rejected. In one of Edith's undated letters she expresses her fear that nothing will come of all of these efforts:

> *Everything is much more difficult as I don't have a passport… I first have to have a written invitation from you in order to submit this [application] for the possible procuring of the passport. The positive chance of immigration that the South African Consulate has referred to was probably based on English cordiality. I believe that it has no factual basis.*

Meanwhile, it must have been unbearable for Edith to have to endure the daily harassments and humiliations of new Nazi racial laws and still find that every effort to escape was being blocked. In a letter to my father in the late 1930s, Edith writes, "*It is difficult today to get accommodated anywhere*". This short sentence captures her sinking realisation that diligently completing all these immigration forms would probably come to nought. She must have understood by then that those Jews without financial resources or special skills and qualifications were trapped. But she must have known that articulating this would frustrate her ever optimistic mother. In another undated letter written to my father in 1938 or 1939, Edith tries to convey to my father once more that she is doing her best to get out:

> *Berlin, no date*
>
> *Dear Herbert*
> *First of all, I appreciated your effort. Hetty [Levy] has invited me in such a loving and caring manner that I am really looking forward to meeting her personally.*
>
> *There is a rumor going round that some more visitor visas shall be issued in December. Tomorrow I will start making arrangements to obtain a visa, but I doubt that I will succeed as applying for a passport and other related formalities will take much more time than I have got. Anyhow, I will try my very best…. The size of my class shrinks continuously because*

many children leave for Holland or other countries. Actually one can only be happy for them, although for us this marks the beginning of the end….
Regards, Edith

The sentence *"The size of my class shrinks continuously… for us this marks the beginning of the end…"* repeats what she wrote to Artur on 30 November 1938. Although she is pleased that the children are being rescued, losing her job will exacerbate her family's already very dire financial predicament. I also suspect that teaching the children also gave Edith a sense of meaning and purpose in these terrifyingly uncertain times; once this was taken from her, there would be nothing left. After April 1939, Kindertransports began to intensify, mostly to Britain. Because of this, the majority of German youngsters managed to get out before the war started. Of the Jews left in Germany at the start of the war in September 1939, 75 per cent were over forty.[48] For Edith, the shrinking class sizes signalled the shrinking possibilities of hope.

During a visit to Centrum Judaicum in Berlin in 1998, I met a group of elderly women who had been evacuated from Berlin as part of the *Kindertransports* to England in the late 1930s. I was wandering through the exhibits when I came across these women. I was curious about them and approached the tour guide. He told me that he had been a teacher in Berlin in the 1930s. Acknowledging that it was a long shot, I asked him whether he knew of a teacher called Edith Robinski. He seemed flummoxed and responded that there were probably many women with that name. He then began to page through a booklet until he came to a page with a photograph of a group of teachers from the Volksschule Choriner Strase in Berlin.[49]

Edith is seated on the far right in this 1939 photograph of the teachers from the Volksschule Choriner Strase; Edith's colleague who I met at Centrum Judaicum in Berlin in 1998 is standing third from the right.

[48] Roseman, M. 2000.*The Past in Hiding*. London: Penguin Books, p.113.
[49] The book was entitled *Judische Schulen in Berlin* (The Jewish Schools in Berlin)

I immediately picked out Edith seated on the far right. He told me that he was the teacher standing behind her on the third from the right. By then a group of the former Kindertransport women had gathered around us. One of them told me that one of their tour group, a woman now living in England, had been one of Edith's favourite pupils, and that she had remained at the hotel that day because she was not feeling well. They said that Edith had been especially kind and patient with this young pupil, and they suggested that I meet up with her at the hotel. The tour guide suddenly closed down the discussion, insisting that I had enough information. The women protested about his sudden refusal to help me any further. Unfortunately, I acquiesced and left the group. To this day I still regret backing down. I can only speculate what I could have learnt about my aunt from her former pupil. Why did the tour guide close down our conversation so abruptly? What was he hiding? Perhaps he knew something about how Edith was arrested after she went underground.

In undated correspondence to my father - probably written between September 1938 and the start of the war a year later - Edith writes "*the atmosphere makes one a bit nervous"*. This "nervousness" pervades all her correspondence, even when she does not overtly mention it.

> *Dear Heppchen,*
>
> *Enclosed please find the translated [teacher reference] reports. I think they are in order like that. If necessary I will also send legally attested ones. You will have to inform me about that. Otherwise there is nothing special except that the atmosphere makes one a bit nervous. On the other hand one is, with regard to time pressure alone, so occupied by the school, that one neglects the most important issue, namely to get out. As probably in a few months' time it will not be possible to achieve this. Artur should please kindly send me the address of Hans Segal. If he then would be in a position to organise a position for a domestic worker or a job with children, there would be a prospect to get out. It is a great pity that A. has not yet found his feet. Now he will probably have to move on again, the poor boy. Well, hopefully soon something favourable will come up for him. Next time I want to write more. Still everything of the best. Be well…Again everything of the best. With regard to the position in Cape Town I wish myself and you much success. Warm regards, Edith*

On 12 May 1939, Edith thanks my father for assisting with organising an arranged marriage. She now believes that she will be in a stronger position to get a permit to enter Rhodesia. She again reassures my father that she is actively preparing herself for her new life, either in South Africa or Rhodesia. She is learning typewriting and shorthand in English.

Berlin 12. 5. 39

Dear Heppchen, first of all heartfelt thanks for organizing the marriage affidavit. In the worst case one can always fall back on it and it really is a relief to me. So I have taken cognisance of the fact that I am now engaged. This after all is already something. Isn't it? Artur wrote that he hopes and trusts to receive the permit for Rhodesia. This would be simply wonderful, although I still doubt whether the authorities there will respond to it. In any case I am now beginning to learn German shorthand transferred to English. The same applies to some typewriting, only with the school work so little time remains [for me to do this]. I am already longing very much for my two big brothers and …often hold you in my thoughts. You write that I will perhaps not like A. [the man she is to marry], I don't believe this and nobody is making such high demands. Main thing, one can work and breathe fresh air. [Then all] is well.

At the bottom of the page of a letter from Cecilie to my father dated 15 June 1939, Edith once again refers to the children who are leaving the country on a daily basis:

Dear Heppchen! I cannot tell you anything of significance. At school the children are leaving daily and after the holidays classes will be amalgamated because 50% are Pol[ish] children who must leave [Germany] within a very short space of time. On Tuesday I will go to the women's [employment] agency to try and get a job in England. If someone organizes a position from E.[ngland] then it will be quicker. Many jobs are available if one makes the effort on one's own over there. From here not much can be done. Next week the long holidays are beginning, but I am not participating in the [school] holiday [outing] because one is not even allowed to be out in the fresh air. Our children do not have much here. Otherwise nothing new. Wishing you all the best, health and business success. Perhaps there will be a good outcome regarding the household job in N.Rh[odesia].
More heartfelt greetings, your Edith.

The two short sentences, "*One is not even allowed to be out in the fresh air. Our children do not have much here*", once again conveys the claustrophobic atmosphere for Jews in Berlin at the time. Edith's previous letters lamented that they were no longer permitted to enter parks, and Jewish children had nowhere to go during their school holidays. In the past, during the school vacations, Edith would take the children on outings to Berlin's numerous parks and lakes. Now they were confined to their homes and school yards. Physical and social space was swiftly shrinking, and so was any hope for the future. Edith was struggling to breath; her world was constricting daily.

THIRTEEN

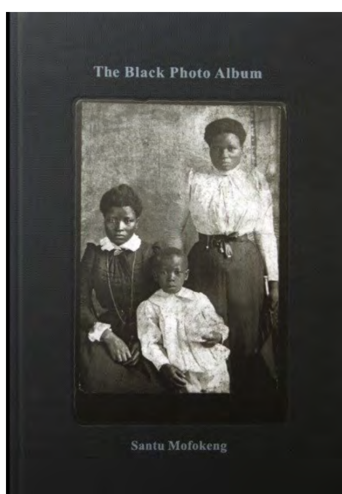
The Photo Album

In July 2014, while cleaning up her late mother's flat, my cousin Cecilia[50] found a photograph of our grandparents and Edith. It looks like a picnic photograph, with the three of them sitting on a blanket on the grass in front a tree trunk with a thickly wooded area behind them. It was probably taken in the late 1930s in a park in Berlin or the surrounding areas. The body language between Edith and her father looks intimate and loving. My grandmother seems a little left out. No one is smiling. My grandmother does not even look at the camera. On the right of the frame, near the tree, I see a brief case. From reading the letters, I know that Edith and my grandparents would sometimes have a walk or a picnic in the Tiergarten after dropping off immigration documents at the South African Consulate at Tiergartenstrasse 18. I also know that Jews were later prevented from even entering parks. As always, I cannot help but see danger lurking everywhere, both in the frame and beyond it. In the background of this photograph I see small shadowy figures moving amongst the trees, approaching them with threatening intent. When I blow up the image on my computer screen, the effect is even more chilling. I anticipate the worst. My family photographs from Berlin are never innocent.

In *The Black Photo Album*, the South African photographer Santu Mofokeng also looks beyond the frame to make sense of his photographic subjects. The photographs he is interested in are commissioned family studio portraits of ten black South African working-

[50] Cecilia's father Artur named both her and her brother David after his parents.

class and middle-class families. Taken between 1890 and 1950, Mofokeng self-consciously creates a fictive family photo album filled with portraits of urban, educated, Christian Africans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He found these photographs in homes, mostly hidden away, neglected and rotting in cupboards, cardboard boxes and plastic bags. Having "rescued" them, he reminds us that what lies outside of the frame may be even more significant than what we see within it.



Looking beyond the frame of these Victorian and Edwardian-era photographs, Mofokeng observes that the black Africans posing for these studio portraits were already being subjected to colonial racial classification and discrimination that impacted upon every aspect of their lives. He is intrigued by how these self-styled family portraits seem to momentarily transcend these brute colonial realities. For Mofokeng, the studio subjects represent themselves as well-groomed, dignified modern Victorian citizens, rather than as submissive and subjugated subjects of the colonial state. Mofokeng refuses to dismiss these self-representations as signs of misguided and hopelessly naïve bourgeois aspirations to respectability in colonial settings saturated by racial domination, exclusion and subjection. Instead, he celebrates the agency of Africans who attempt to hold onto their humanity despite the persistent erosion of their sense of citizenship and dignity. I find that Mofokeng's portraits have a potent resonance with the photographs of Edith and her family taken in the late 1930s. By the time the Robinski family were being photographed in Berlin, they too were being subjected to racial classification and discrimination in every aspect of their lives.

I find Mofokeng's description of what was taking place outside of the frame of his South African family photographs particularly poignant given my own efforts to make sense of the family photographs from Berlin. Mofokeng writes:

> The significance of the images lies outside of their frames, i.e. in the realm of the political. They were made in a period when the South African state was being entrenched and policies were being articulated toward a people the government designated "Natives". It was an era mesmerized by the newly discovered life sciences, such as anthropology, informed by social Darwinism. [It was] a time which spawned all kinds of "experts" (so dearly loved by politicians), who could be conjured up to provide "expert knowledge" on any number of issues, including matters "race". Race thinking was given scientific authority in this period and was used to inform

> state policy on "the Native Question". Officially, black people were frequently depicted in the same visual language as the flora and fauna, represented as if in their natural habitat for the collector of natural history. Invariably they were relegated to the lower orders of the species, especially on those occasions when they were depicted as belonging to the "great family of man".

I cannot help but view Edith's photographs with the full knowledge of racial classification, the Nuremberg Laws, and the impending catastrophe that is looming beyond the frame. Michael Andre Bernstein warns against retroactive foreshadowing whereby "the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by the narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events *as though they too should have known what was to come*".[51] But how can I blame Edith and her family in Berlin? They also did their utmost to escape, but their efforts were stymied at every step.

In his review of *The Black Photo Album*, the South African art critic and journalist Matthew Krouse writes that "looking at the images of [black African] tennis players, pipe-smoking dandies, gentlemen in riding beeches, ladies clutching parasols, brides and grooms and, later, flapper girls in collars and ties, one is reminded of the identity shift of Jews in Germany on the eve of the Nazi Holocaust. Somehow history would soon teach them that prejudice does not bow to assimilation."[52] The photograph of Edith, her mother and Hildegard was taken in 1937, at a time when this tragic lesson was becoming blatantly clear to my father's family trapped in Berlin. By then, they would have had no illusions about the possibilities of assimilation. By 1937, following the passing of the Aliens Act in South Africa, my father would also have had no doubts about how difficult it would be to rescue his family. Here too the argument was made in the South African Parliament that Jewish immigrants were entirely unassimilable.

---

[51] Michael Andre Bernstein, Foregone Conclusions, 16, cited in Hirsch, 2012:63.
[52] Martin Krouse, Confounding expectations? Thing of Beauty, The Black Photo Album. *Mail & Guardian* Arts Section, Friday November 22 to 28 2013, p.2.

FOURTEEN

CECILIE'S BURDEN

On 1 December 1938, three weeks after Kristallnacht, Cecilie writes to Artur to reassure him that Edith is doing all she can to apply for the teaching position in Northern Rhodesia. My grandmother reports that Edith has asked for a reference letter from a certain Dr Bamberger. She has also sent Artur a photograph of herself. I suspect that this is probably the postcard-size studio photograph of Edith found by my cousin Cecilia in her late parents' Sea Point flat in April 2014.

Berlin, 1.12.38

> *My dear boy! As I have written a letter to Herbi on Tuesday I want to write to you today. First of all, many thanks for your heartfelt congratulations on my birthday and may the Almighty grant that all your wishes be fulfilled for the good. I wish you good health and a life without worries so that we will always hear glad tidings from you [plural]… I am relatively well. The only problem is that Edith is so impatient and she complains all the time that she will not get out. She has requested Dr Bamberger to write a very good [testimonial] report for her… Have you already received her photograph? I have sent it by normal mail. Airmail to you is 10 pfennig cheaper. Siegfried now has hardly any chance to learn anything, as the Jewish institutions have been dissolved. He wants to learn to dye clothes and to remove stains with an acquaintance of his. Would he have the possibility to earn something there with that? It would be a blessing if the boy could get out. I probably have already told you that Horst is in Dachau, Norbert in Stallupönen (town in East Prussia) Hermann in Sachsenhausen, Katz is also gone.*
>
> *Dear father's health is good thank God… Each Wednesday a skat [card game] evening takes place at our house [and] Siegfried also participates. For the time being I shall continue to live here… S. is very ill and in bed and E. is very nervous so that his mouth twitches whenever he speaks. Aunt Hildchen intends to go to Bolivia, as well as Fritz Cohn. She has already paid a 500 mark deposit. Egon [Holz] likes it very much in P.[alestine] except that he receives no money there. Otherwise everything is as usual. Please write to us in detail how you are faring over there. Does the expenditure not exceed the income? With heartfelt greetings and kisses from us all, your loving parents and siblings. Siegfried, Edith and Aunt send their regards.*

Although Cecelie acknowledges that her daughter is indeed trying her best to emigrate, my grandmother is frustrated with her: "*Edith is so impatient and she complains all the time that she will not get out,*" she writes. Perhaps my grandmother feels that she can report on Edith's anxieties but she cannot express such thoughts herself. She probably felt that it was her duty as a mother to be strong and stoic. But such stoicism required extraordinary faith. Fortunately for my grandmother, she was a deeply religious woman. Having vented to my father about Edith, she then turns to Siegfried's equally precarious predicament. She reports that he has been unable to acquire a new trade to improve his chances of emigrating because the Jewish institutions responsible for technical training have "dissolved". Cecilie seems to become increasingly resigned to the reality that Siegfried's chances of emigrating are diminishing daily. Edith has a much better chance because of her teaching qualifications. But she needs to overcome her defeatist attitude.

By the time this letter was written, on 1 December 1938, only three weeks after Kristallnacht, my grandmother would surely have had no illusions about Hitler's Germany. In a single sentence she conveys the terrifying reality of that time: "*Horst is in Dachau… Herman is in Sachsenhausen, Katz is also gone.*" Only a few days earlier, on 28 November, my grandmother had told my father about this bad news (Ute later tells me that while she was translating this letter she began to realise that my grandmother's repetitions reflected her state of extreme stress and anxiety). Again, she simply states where the relatives are, nothing else. She would no doubt later learn what was happening in camps when Uncle Hermann Holz returned from Sachsenhausen chronically ill. Again, she tries to reassure her sons in Africa: "Otherwise everything is as usual". So much has to be left unsaid; as always, she has to be stoic, silent and vigilant. She ends the letter with a simple and practical question about my father's business in Port Elizabeth: "Does the expenditure not exceed the income?" She cannot express the emotional and psychological pain that she must have been going through. Like my father, my grandmother's pain and despair were hidden beneath banter and practical concerns. We Robinskis all seem to strive to avoid plumbing the depths. Perhaps I am more like my grandmother and my father than I realise.

Despite Cecilia's persistent efforts remain hopeful and optimistic, the nightmare she is living seeps through the thin sheets of paper with their neat handwritten words and sentences. But the meanings are not clear to me. What exactly does Cecilie mean when she writes "S. is very ill and in bed and E. is so nervous that his mouth twitches whenever he speaks"? Who are S. and E. and what caused their afflictions? Could S. be Siegfried and E. Egon? I later learn from a letter sent on 31 December 1939 from Stockholm by my father's

cousin Rudi Robinski to Artur - that Rudi's brother Egon suffered a nervous breakdown after being arrested and jailed for four weeks in Riga for not having identity and travel documents; Egon apparently eventually managed to get to Sweden. But apart from this sketchy account, I have no idea what happened to him. Like the internment of Uncle Hermann and Horst in Sachsenhausen and Dachau, Egon's prison experiences in Riga, and his flight to Sweden, remain shrouded in silence. There is so much that remains unknown. If only my father and Artur were still alive.

One of the few occasions that Cecilie expressed her feelings of grief and despondency is in an undated letter sent to my father in Port Elizabeth. In the letter, which was probably sent shortly after Artur left Berlin, she writes: "*How is your business developing now? What does Artur write? Now the poor boy is so far away from everything and amongst entirely strange people. It is a hard lot for us Jews, all scattered far apart [and] also with an uncertain future. But we [must have] courage and hope for a good future*". Cecilie persistently tried to present a brave front to her sons. The despairing words "*It is a hard lot for us Jews, all scattered far apart*" are immediately followed by her injunction for the family to grasp onto hope. Yet, from 1936 until 1943, when the final letters were sent, there were very few grounds for optimism of any sort. It was left to Edith to articulate the family's unspeakable fears.

My grandmother's unflagging faith and indefatigable optimism, as well as her ceaseless attention to practical family matters, find expression in a letter dated 8 December 1938, a mere few weeks after Kristallnacht.

Berl. 8. 12. 38

> *My dear boy! During this week I have received 2 letters from you and you should not worry about us. With us thank God nothing has changed and we have personally experienced nothing unpleasant. Your dear father and Siegfried are at home and are well and every Wednesday a skat-afternoon game takes place, together with father's regular guests from the Cafê which has meanwhile been sold. I then give coffee and cake and the two foreign gentlemen linger until 6 o'clock. One merchant, one member of the public health department and Siegfried. It then becomes very cosy as the old doctor is quite funny and amusing. As you see, you do not need to worry about us.*
>
> *For the time being I also do not need money because I still have savings. Edith is at the school, still working and gives 100 Mark each month. Sch. [the tenant Schnitzler] has also paid up until now. I don't know what it will look like next month. I have let 2 rooms and*

they bring in 45 Mark. Now some winter aid will come in too and we should always have so much to eat as we have now…

One of these days Edith will collect her [teacher's reference] report and send it to Artur; perhaps there is a possibility that she comes to Rhodesia. It would be desirable if something would materialize for Siegfried. He is learning to dye material and remove spots. Perhaps one can do something with this in Rhodesia. Uncle Herman came home yesterday.

… My dear Herbi, [our] best thanks for your good wishes and we can all use them well. Especially health and happiness, that it will still be granted to us, to find ourselves together in joy and after all these worries, to experience very happy and joyful times. I am full of trust and hope to the Almighty that everything will find a good end. Hildchen still works daily from 8 – 6 o'clock at the school feeding scheme, tomorrow she will again bring 3 mark. So she already has a saving of 15 Mark. How is your business developing? You have many costs, let alone the instalments for the car.

The Aid Society is making efforts For Horst's [emigration to Palestine] because he has after all worked for the Hachshara [a Zionist organisation]. Norbert is expecting a permit from London. I hope the poor boy will soon succeed to get out. Furthermore I wish you best health and good Parnohse.

Heartfelt greetings and kisses from us all from your loving parents and brothers and sisters. Siegfried, Edith as well as the aunts send their regards.

The letter ends with three sentences from my grandfather David:

My [dear] Herbert

Since dear Mutti [Mother] has already imparted everything to you, so I do not have anything more to do but to wish you the best of health and to send you heartfelt greetings and kisses. Please give our regards to the dear relatives… All the best your father.

My dear boy! I too want to end sending you a sign of life, and dear Edith and I are well as far as health is concerned… Now dear boy, warm regards from Siegfried and Edith.

In the midst of the all-encompassing despair surrounding her, Cecilie reports once again on the cosy and convivial atmosphere of my grandfather's *skat* card games held at their apartment on Wednesday evenings. The card games routinely feature in her letters as a coping device, one that seeks to deflect attention from the deepening darkness. Skat

games, an early nineteenth-century three-player card game that originated in Germany, were initially held at David Robinski's Lichtenberg Strase Café in Kreuzberg. I have visited the building and tried to imagine those skat evenings when the Robinski family tried to hold onto sociality in the face of social fragmentation. Notwithstanding her description of the "cosy atmosphere" of the card games, my grandmother fears mentioning the names of the skat players; she simply refers to them as "*the two foreign gentlemen… one merchant, one member of the public health department*". After the violence of Kristallnacht, which exploded only one month earlier, the card games were convened in the privacy of the players' homes. Jewish communal organisations and private homes became the only spaces where Jews could feel a semblance of safety and security. Despite these ominous developments, Cecilie's letter of 8 December 1938 repeats the by now familiar refrain – "*you do not need to worry about us.*" But this reassurance is subverted by a solitary sentence: "*Uncle Hermann came home yesterday*". This is the same Uncle Herman who was arrested and detained at Sachsenhausen after Kristallnacht. But my grandmother does not tell us more. The rest is left to our imagination.

There is something quite formulaic about my grandmother's letters. A devastating sentence saturated with foreboding and fear is followed by one interlaced with levity and banter. The lightness is then typically often followed once more by sentences filled with portents of threat and menace. In this letter of 8 December 1938, the ritualised account of my grandfather's skat evening is followed by a short sentence that captures the fmaily's dire financial circumstances: "*Winter aid will come in.*" Although this is meant to reassure her sons that the family will cope, it also signals their dependency on welfare assistance - by 1940, one in four Jews in Berlin would be on welfare.[53] Despite these mounting economic hardships, my grandmother writes: "*I am full of trust and hope to the Almighty that everything will find a good end.*" Then it is back to immigration matters. At the end of the letter my grandfather David and his eldest son Siegfried write a few lines wishing my father good health. This is one of the very few times that they write to my father. My grandmother is the one who tenaciously sustains the lines of communication between the family and her sons in Africa.

On 24 December 1938, one month after Kristallnacht, my grandmother once again reminds my father of the urgency of immigration for Siegfried and Edith.

24.12.1938

My dearest son

---

[53] Mark Roseman p123.

I received your last two letters simultaneously and, as you can see, the post does not arrive regularly. You will have received news from our dearest Artur in the meantime, so you are informed of his well-being and also that – thank God – nothing changed on our side. We hope that no new laws will be implemented that could lead to further obstacles. My dearest child, emigration is necessary, especially for the young ones Siegfried and Edith. Sadly, things do not go as fast as one would like….
Yesterday was skat day again and Siegfried plays too. From 2 until 7 the gentlemen are lost in their conversations. I expect news from Artur tomorrow, as 14 days have passed…
Today, my dearest son, I cannot write much to you because it is Friday and Siegfried and Edith are playing chess. I wish you a happy new year and best wishes from everyone here.

On 2 January 1939 Cecilie sends a letter to my father in which she apologises that her writing is "jumbled" and her mind is "distracted".

Berlin, 2.1.39

My dear boy! Today we received your dear letter of the 12th December [1938] and we are very pleased that you are well thank God and that everything will fall into place with regard to your business.
Today Edith was at Schmutzler's and wanted to buy material for a costume. She bought a very good material for 6 mark per meter and a beautiful dress which had cost over 1 mark, for 70 pfennig. She also received the 53 mark from us, and Edith said that Artur has written a new letter, which he did not need to do. Mr Schwarte was here and wants to collect the piano in the next few days. The aunts have not yet sold the houses. They do not yet have approval. Helmut [Cohen] has not yet advanced with regard to his departure. You have probably heard that both aunts have booked seats for Bolivia. Ali Beelitzer is still here and is waiting for [the] exit [permit]. The Wolffs are also waiting for visas.
Today we have skat day. Siegfried also participates and you will probably conclude from my letter that my thoughts are jumbled; I am distracted, Edith is now making strenuous efforts with regard to emigration and is trying to attend to all the necessary things. She is now learning [to make] lady's finery and will send in her reports tomorrow. Siegfried will also try everything in order to be successful.
Heartfelt greetings and kisses to you as well as to dear Artur from us all your loving parents and siblings. Soon I will write more, in detail and more relaxed; but the letter should still go off still today.

After translating this letter, Ute believed that its disjointedness mirrored Cecilie's fragmented state of mind and the precarious nature of her daily existence. This letter, written on 2 January 1939, is packed with short, staccato reports on the activities and predicaments of family members. She tells my father that her sisters are desperately trying to sell their houses so that they can emigrate, but they don't have the necessary approval yet. She then jumps from one bit of family news to the next: Edith went shopping for material to make a dress, the piano has been sold, the two aunts have booked seats for Bolivia, Ali Beelitzer and the Wolffs are waiting for exit visas and so on. The letter is garbled, but this is hardly surprising given what is happening. Fear and uncertainty are intensifying and their financial predicament is worsening daily. The piano is sold, either because of the family's impoverishment or to raise the funds to pay taxes for emigration. By apologising to my father for her "jumbled" writing, and for being "distracted", my grandmother, perhaps unwittingly, acknowledges that there are cracks in her amour. Ute and I soon began to identify the patterns - first the innocuous news and banter about the family, then the one line intimations of ominous threats. We also learnt to recognise in her writing other signs of her anguished state of mind.

Although my grandmother's letters were often jumbled, jumping skittishly from one thing to the next, only once did she apologise to my father for this. Her fitful switching from topic to topic was typically separated by a comma, where Ute felt there ought to have been a full stop. Ute insisted that this was not because Cecilia couldn't grasp basic German grammar rules and conventions, but rather that, as the unbearable pressures of daily life intensified, her language use and sentence structure began to collapse. Not even my stoic, uncomplaining and ever hopeful grandmother could suppress these unconscious linguistic signs of psychic turmoil and anxiety. Yet, she would relentlessly strive to come across as if she were coping with everything flung at her and the family. Sitting in her Vredehoek flat, Ute described to me how she learnt to identify and interpret these linguistic signs and silences:

> What I read in these letters is a situation of great fear and a sort of reluctance to say what they want to say. And, one knows from the history about the things that must have been happening, like Kristallnacht. But they can write nothing about this - except your grandmother writes, "You probably have heard what happened already. Luckily nothing happened to us"… They are always positive, they never complain, they just say, "Please find a way for us to get out of here." And I felt that this must

have been a terrible strain on your father, a terrible strain. Because when these letters [were written] the Aliens Act was enforced in South Africa, and he must have known better than they did, that he can't get them out here.

Ute identified striking differences between the correspondence of Edith and her mother. Edith never resorted to light banter to displace fears and anxieties. In her direct, modern German writing style, she provides frighteningly dark snapshots of the nightmare that she and the rest of the family are living. It is precisely Edith's refusal to suppress this dark reality that puts her on the path to conflict with her ever-hopeful mother. As Ute noted about my grandmother, "She comes across as very noble, because there's never a complaint. She's always trying to be positive… She says in this letter, 'I can't go and leave Hilda with strangers, but maybe you can make a plan that she takes over Edith's Marriage Certificate'… So there is always still hope". But there were occasionally cracks in my grandmother's armour and stoic demeanour. On 20 January 1939, she starts her letter to my father by complaining that Edith is becoming "wearisome" and that her busy school commitments and her general state of "nervousness" are keeping her from properly attending to immigration matters.

Berl. 20.1.39

My dear Herbi! Today I must write to you, particularly because I have already received 2 letters from you of the 1/1 and 6/1 from C.T… Edith's reports will hopefully go off these days, she is a wearisome auntie. Nu! All is well that ends well, which is also a consolation. She is, as before, fully occupied in the school, from 8 to 2 and then still from 4 until 7 o'clock, and little time remains for her to translate the [testimonial] reports, with her nervousness and all.

Siegfried also was here yesterday and he can only attend to the issue of emigration next week. Yesterday he sold his bedroom for 350 mark, and he receives beds and a cupboard from the [Jewish] community [welfare organisation]. For the time being they sleep on 2 chaiselongues; [Edith II] received the 2nd one from the lawyer [she worked for] as a keepsake, as well as the Mercedes typewriter, and on this she does small private work at home. Her work [at the legal firm] finishes on Saturday. S. [Siegfried] has let one room for 25 m[ar]k … the apartment costs him 17 mark per month and he has submitted an application for [welfare] support. Today father collected the medical certificates for himself as the Jewish day (Judentag) will take place at the Wohle [Jewish Welfare Centre] on Thursday; the

officials were very courteous and obliging. Now our father's name is David Israel R., my name they have not as yet registered as Sarah.

… Everyone wants to leave and it is more and more difficult with regard to this. Slowly but surely some remedy has to be found in this matter. Does your friend Katz have a business in C.T.?

With me thank God everything is still as it was, if it remains like this, I am satisfied. Father has had his skat day today again from 2-7 o'clock in Lichtenberg [the café] and Monday at our place. It is quite cosy then as the 3. Member of the public health department (title: Sanitätsrat) Dr Bomke is full of jokes and there is a lot of laughter. Yes, laughter. I then give coffee and cake. For the time being you do not have to worry about us. Main thing, that we are all well. Now over there it is real summer and here it is beginning to get warmer; but at the beginning of January the days were quite cold.

Otherwise, my dear boy, I do not have to anything of interest to impart to you. We wish you the best of health and a very good business. Many tender greetings and kisses from your loving parents and grandparents and the entire mishpoke. During the coming days Manfred Holz is going to P[alestine], Egon likes it more there every day. Helmuth [Cohen][54] *has not progressed with his emigration. Meta will meanwhile work as a nurse in the hospital. Helmuth will not be able to survive that long without income, as he also pays for his parents in the aged home and as his brother lives with him. Again wishing you everything of the best. Regards to the mishpoke over there.*

As usual, my grandmother moves between hinting at devastating developments, before changing to more mundane topics. We learn that Siegfried has taken decisive steps to immigrate by "selling his bedroom for 350 Marks". But, in between these detailed accounts of all of frantic family efforts to flee, she drops a one-line bombshell: "*Now our father's name is David Israel R., my name they have not as yet registered as Sarah.*" This latest decree, whereby all Jewish men and women have to take on the middle names of Israel and Sarah respectively, must surely have been interpreted by my grandmother as yet another bad omen. This was one of the 80 racial ordinances that systematically stripped German Jews of the citizenship and dignity. The classification of Jews as Israels and Sarahs was but one step closer along the path to destruction. But my grandmother cannot afford to dwell on this disastrous turn for the worst. She quickly applies the familiar family balm by turning to the

[54] Dr. Helmut Cohen and his wife Meta somehow managed to continue working at the Jewish Children's Hospital during the war. My parents visited them after in the war at their home in Miami.

joking and laughter at her husband skat game. Despite all that is happening, Cecilie assures my father, *"With me, thank God, everything is still as it was, if it remains like this, I am satisfied."*

These ritualised refrains, along with the repetitive reports on the card games, come across as courageous efforts to hold onto the last vestiges of dignity in the face of relentless dehumanization. When Ute began the translation process, she also noticed that my grandmother would often use virtually the exact same words to describe something that she had already written about in a prior letter to my father or to Artur, sometimes only a few days earlier. This repetitive pattern intensified in the late 1930s, as the terror of daily life was itself intensifying. By identifying these linguistic signs, Ute was doing much more than translation; she was deciphering what lay hidden behind the words and the repetitive, disjointed and jarring sentences.

There was this Goat, a recently published book on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, focuses on the intricate relationship between translation and interpretation. The book was written by three South African academics who spent to two years doing research on the TRC testimony of Notrose Konile. Analysing this single testimony, the authors, Antjie Krog, Nosisis Mpolweni and Kopano Ratele (2009)[55] uncovered some of the complexities of linguistic and cultural interpretations of the TRC hearings. Mrs Konile's testimony concerned the killing of her son by police in Cape Town in 1986, in what came to be known as the Guguluthu Seven Massacre. The authors were initially perplexed when reading the English translation of Mrs. Konile's testimony, which was originally presented before the TRC in isiXhosa. The testimony came across to them as confusing, incoherent and, at times, totally incomprehensible. They initially attributed this to the cultural Otherness and "strangeness" of this rural Xhosa woman. The testimony, for instance, referred to a goat that stood upright, and contained confusing references to events that seemed to blur the line between dreams and the awakened state. The authors later discovered that this apparent confusion in the English translation was a result of the TRC's failure to properly contextualise Mrs. Konile's experiences at different moments of her life. When the authors visited her at her home in an impoverished rural village in the Eastern Cape province, they were finally able to make linguistic and cultural sense of her testimony. By the time they left her home, they had come to the conclusion that her TRC testimony was neither confused nor strange. Ute helped me to realise that the daily realities of my grandmother's existence in Berlin in the 1930s and early 1940s needed to be understood to

[55] Antjie Krog, Nosisis Mpolweni and Kopano Ratele (2009), *There was this Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission Testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile.* Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

make sense of her letters. Like Mrs. Konile's testimony, Cecilie's letters needed to be properly contextualised. These letters could only be properly understood if they were interpreted in ways that went well beyond the mere translation of German into English.

Ute also began to notice that my grandmother sometimes used very simplistic German and poor grammar. "In order to be able to write", Ute said, "she uses simple language and sentences, because she is hiding something". Ute also believed that "Cecilia was a very cultured person, because at other times she used very sophisticated language". Ute found that my grandmother would often lapse into poor grammar and simple German, and then compose herself and return to using "proper German". Ute believed that these instances of linguistic breakdown mirrored her state of turmoil. Yet, as everyone around her was getting more despairing and desperate to get out - to London, Sweden, Trinidad, Palestine, South Africa, Australia, Shanghai, Chile, Uruguay and Bolivia, to anywhere - Cecilie had to, as always, be the steady rock around which all this frantic family activity revolved.

On 25 January 1939, Siegfried, the oldest sibling, types a letter to my father telling him about his efforts to emigrate.

Berlin, 25 January 1939

My dear brother,

Today I wish to reply to your letter of the 13th. We were delighted to discover that you are doing well and wish you best of luck… Everything is still the same on our side. We will devote all our energy to emigration. I started by selling our bedrooms for 350M. I also asked my former employers for letters of reference. When the rules to emigrate are less strict again, I will deliver the papers at the consulate. Your suggestion of considering Shanghai is probably not bad, but I fear that the climate is not optimal for me and would like to first consider the other places.

Yours Siegfried

Siegfried comes across as confident that my father will succeed in helping him to get into South Africa. He tries to reassure my father that everything is on track – he has sold his personal belongings, requested references from his employers, and is waiting for immigration rules to become more lenient. But he is an industrial worker who specialises in dyeing buttons, and there does not seem to be much demand for his skills. In June 1939, three months before the war, Siegfried writes to my father updating him about his

immigration efforts. He also reassures my father that both their parents' and his own accommodation situation is secure, for the time being.

Berlin, 2 June 1939

My dear Herbert

Today I wish to write to you instead of dear Mutti [mother]. We received two letters after each other; one dated the 19th and the other dated 24th of the same month. We also received a letter from dear Artur yesterday. These letters always trigger great feelings of joy, hope and confidence – your last letter in particular was gave rise to these feelings. I am eternally grateful for all your help and effort. It is true that it is difficult to make any arrangements from here, which is why, dear boy, we are so thankful that you are supporting us with the process of emigration. I wish to talk about the matter Chile. You are aware that I have already initiated the plan to immigrate to Australia, but I have not yet heard anything back from them. However, I want to first wait for an answer before you start the immigration arrangements for Chile. I do not want you to pay anything yet, because Australia is less costly than Chile. The money paid for Australia is also less likely to get lost. Dear mother has probably already told you that dear Edith (Siegfried's wife) works at a welfare society. Edith has enquired about the living situation in Chile and was told that, both from an economic as well as a climatic point of view, things are very good. Under the pledge of discretion, she was also given the following addresses: Dr Fritz Chodziesner, Montevideo in Uruguay, Feliciano Rodriguez 2668. This person could organise the entry permit needed, and I urge you to contact him as soon as possible. You will also have to give him our details: S R worker, 8.8.05. E R, born Urbanski, shorthand typist and housekeeper, 30.3.06. Dt Eylau [Germany].

Now I want to come back to your question with regard to the apartment. A new law was implemented, which states that Jews are only allowed to stay in Jewish houses [accommodation designated for Jews]. The landlord can, however, only terminate an existing lease if alternative accommodation has been found. It is, of course, only for a limited amount of time that we will be able to remain in our present apartments. Yesterday Mr Völker visited the parents, and he said that the West [of Berlin] will be the first to be affected by the law. He said he would only terminate the lease if compelled to… Our present landlord does not seem to have any intentions to evict us.

… Our Etsch [Siegfried's sister Edith] is very agitated about your suggestion to leave and would like to jump onto the train immediately. The dear parents would also love to get rid of the nuisance, because sometimes she is truly unbearable.

We are in the middle of summer here and mother visits Aunt Frieda daily to lie in the sun on her balcony. Also dear father goes to the park to relax when he does not have a skat day.

I believe I have now reported on everything that is worth knowing. I am also tired from writing, which I have discovered is not one of my strongest qualities.

Warm regards, your brother Siegfried.

I have no photographs of Siegfried. I can only try to imagine who he was and what he looked like from his correspondence to my father and from what others have written about him. Artur told me that he was a communist and a friend of Martin Buber. Beyond this, I know very little about him. In 2014, while travelling through Namibia, I dreamt that Siegfried and my father were dancing on the roof of a moving train in a tipsy state. Siegfried's looks resembled those of my father as a young man. He also looked remarkably like my brother Michael and cousin David Robins. He was nattily dressed, tall, well-built and handsome. While watching the two of them dancing, I suddenly realised that they were meant to be looking after my two young boys. I was relieved to see that the boys were fine, and then slipped out of the dream.

Siegfried is portrayed in his mother's letters to my father and in his 1934 wedding *Tafellied* as a charming and debonair young man. One of the *Tafellied* lines reads, "And Edith too from her first glance, with Siegfried was forthwith entranced". Siegfried's problem is that he is neither practical nor in possession of the requisite skills to emigrate. In the months leading up to the war, Siegfried still believes he will escape even though the gates were closing everywhere. His financial situation is also dire, as his wife has lost her job as a typist at a paralegal firm because of racial ordinances preventing Jews working in the legal profession. The day she left her job she was given the Mercedes typewriter that Siegfried used to type his letters to his brother in Port Elizabeth.

Siegfried's optimistic spirit must have taken a battering when he realised that his chances of getting out were fading fast. Like his mother, his two letters to my father reveal that he was determined to be strong and optimistic; he probably could not bear to let his siblings and wife see any signs of doubt and dread. He may have felt that he had no choice

but to continue playing the part of the heroic, strong and courageous Siegfried of ancient German and Old Norse lore, the one who fought the dragon and triumphed.

In a letter to Artur sent a week later, on 27 January, Cecilie still comes across as optimistic that Edith will get out. But she is acutely aware that Siegfried and other relatives are not making any progress with their immigration plans.

Berlin, 27. 1. 39

Yesterday we celebrated Edith's birthday and we thought much about you and Herbi. Both brothers so far away and soon she will perhaps also be there. She has invited 2 friends (female) and 1 gentleman acquaintance. We spent a cosy time together until 10 o'clock. As gifts she received many sweets, as well as handkerchiefs and from me lingerie. With God's help she will send off her [teacher reference] reports this week. There is no great hurry with her departure as she will get away alright, even though a few weeks later. After all, she is a tenacious auntie. With the departure of the aunts, as well as the other relatives, no progress has been achieved, everyone has to wait…

I am surprised that my grandmother was so confident that Edith would be successful. She writes to Artur that "*there is no great hurry with her departure as she will get away alright, even though a few weeks later*". Given the difficulties that so many relatives were facing, I find it difficult to understand how she could have been so certain about her daughter's safe passage from Germany. Maybe she felt so confident because of Edith's teaching qualifications. Artur in fact managed to find a post for her as a teacher in Northern Rhodesia, but this eventually fell through.

On 31 March 1939, my grandmother begins her letter to my father with detailed information on family members, birthday parties, Pesach (Passover) festivities and, as always, her husband's weekly skat games.

Berlin,
31.III.39

My dear Herbi, again 14 days have passed since I have sent you post and I have meanwhile given news about myself to d[ear] Artur. Now it is your turn again and I want to chat with you a little. Last Sunday aunt Frida celebrated her birthday with coffee, cake, tarts, bread rolls, fish, and so on and it was very cosy. Helmuth, Meta and child, Albert, Hanny and child, Mirs Kissmann and daughter and I were present. Hopefully you have celebrated your day of honour festively. I have celebrated it at home with coffee and cake, my speciality and have

thought a lot about you. Does one also give birthday presents over there? Now we are a few days before the Pesach holiday and I have a lot of work. Edith came today to spend 19 days of holidays. She began by sleeping. Right after lunch I packed her to bed and she sleeps like a Rohrspatz [a bird]. For this time of the year it is still quite cold and I must heat the oven a lot. D[ear] father today has again his famous skat day and he will come home shortly before shabbes [Sabbath]. Yesterday Edith II had her birthday. We were not at her place because some time ago father had a small argument with her…

But these reports on birthdays, festivities and skat are followed by accounts of hardships experienced by relatives:

Uncle [Hermann] Holz must report daily to the police until he has emigrated. When he receives the permit from the sales of the house he will no longer be permitted to stay. He does not know where to go, he also does not have the presentation money [Vorzeigegeld]. He did not have anything to give to poor relatives, now he has to help himself…
Today a letter arrived from uncle Wolf and he misses news from all the relatives from Africa. After all, you cannot make efforts for everyone. Let him ask there again, then they will surely reply. Today is the last day on which the Jews have to deliver, apart from two sets of cutlery and small pieces of silver, everything of gold, silver and gems. Uncle Hermann and aunt Frida are most agitated. This year there is a scarcity of mazzas and one has to go about them sparingly, so as not to have to eat chometz. Do you not have any news from Joe [Levy, attorney in PE and husband of Hettie] on behalf of Edith? Hildchen works all day and looks very pale. She is missing the daily walks which she had before. Today she is also coming for a holiday of 14 days and will surely recover during this time. She feels very proud, when she presents me with her weekly salary of 3 marks. Apart from this everything is the same here. We wish you the best health and much success in your business.
A very good Yom Tov (Jontef) and many warm greetings and kisses from us all your loving parents and siblings. Siegfried is struggling for Bolivia. Whether he will succeed is questionable.

Matters have deteriorated dramatically. Uncle Herman Holz, who was one of thousands of Jewish men deported to concentration camps after Kristallnacht, must now report to the police station daily until he leaves the country. In a single, short sentence,

Cecilie refers to a new law that requires Jews to hand over all gold, silver and gem jewellery; the law had been introduced two months earlier on 1 February 1939. As the situation for the family deteriorates, my grandmother advises my father which family members he should prioritise when it comes to providing assistance. A tragic form of triage is starting to unfold within the family. "*Uncle Herman did not have anything to give to poor relatives, now he should help himself. You cannot make an effort for everyone,"* she writes. At the same time, there seems to be an unstated assumption that my father and Artur should prioritise Edith, then Siegfried, and finally, the parents and Hildegard. But Hildegard is not the only one whose emigration prospects look bleak. "Siegfried is struggling for Bolivia. Whether he will succeed is questionable," she writes. It is now six months after Kristallnacht and six months before the outbreak of the war. Possibilities to escape seem to diminish daily.

In this letter written in March 1939, my grandmother tells my father that, although his younger sister Hildegard earns a mere 3 marks a month working for a school feeding scheme, she "feels very proud" that she is able to contribute towards the family's income. Hildegard probably had a mental disability (photographs of her reveal signs of a lazy eye, which could have been a symptom of this condition). My grandmother seems to imply this when she remarks that even though Hildegard labours under extremely poor conditions for very low pay, this work is good for her and makes her feel useful. This badly paid work seems to function here as a form of occupational therapy.

On 14 April 1939, Cecilie reports to my father that livelihood options for German Jews are being systematically shut down. She reports on the difficulties faced by two of their relatives, Dr. Helmut Cohen and his wife Meta. Even though Jewish doctors are no longer permitted to practice, Dr Cohen has somehow managed to retain his job at the Berlin Jewish Hospital:

Berlin, 14. 4. 39

> *Professor Strauch at the hospital has made efforts on behalf of Helmut [Cohen] and he has got his [medical] practice back. He will practise in the hospital and will move in there tomorrow. Whether Meta will carry on practising the nursing profession there I do not yet know. Helmut has to pay for his parents in the old age home, and he would not have been able to accomplish this in the long run had he not gotten back the practice.; Edith II has obtained a position in the kitchen of the Jewish hospital; but I hardly believe that she will succeed there. The salary is also minimal, 45 mark with free meals [this could also mean board and lodging]. Siegfried still wants to learn to manufacture buttons…*

Helmut and Meta Cohen would be the only relatives of my father's left in Germany when the war ended. A Berlin-based historian of the Third Reich, Dr Annegret Ehmann, told me that the only way the Cohen couple could have survived the war was if one of them was not Jewish. "Mixed-race" couples (*Mischlinge*) were given some degree of protection from deportation. My father had told me that Helmut was able to continue practicing at the Jewish Hospital in Berlin throughout the war. Being married to a woman of "Aryan blood" must have provided protection for him to survive.

On 14 April 1939, Cecilie again assures my father that both she and my grandfather are still doing their utmost to emigrate.

> *My dear Herbi! We have received your dear letter of the 4.4. on the 12th and were very happy that you are well. The days of the festival were very pleasant, I missed our two boys at the Seder [Passover] table and my thoughts were with you a lot. We received post from dear Artur on the same day and he has told us that he was invited to the Seder evenings, and we of course were very pleased to learn by this that Jews are living there too [i.e., in Northern Rhodesia]. If the business there will improve, he will be satisfied, which is a great satisfaction for us. He did not write any more details about the place and the business situation there, the main thing is that the climate agrees with him and that he earns his upkeep…*
>
> *Now my dear boy, you are really moving heaven and earth to set things in motion in order to help us. Your dear father has written today to Mr [Max] Israel and we will visit him on Sunday. We just want to orientate ourselves a little and we will also send along hair-covers. They are thinking of travelling [to South Africa] in the middle of May.*
>
> *Edith was very pleased about the affidavit and this is now proof that she will after all get out, as she said. Now we have to await further developments and see what help is forthcoming. Perhaps also Hachshara abroad or Rhodesia.*
>
> *… How is your shop getting on? Do you sell en detail? We wish you much success in this. Otherwise here everything is as it was. Siegfried will probably come for supper, he will also write you a letter shortly. Things are not so easy with regard to his emigration, everything is really quite hard, also with regard to all the others.*
>
> *Today on Friday I still have to see to a lot of things and want to close my letter. Father has skat day again today, [although] it would be better for him now to be in the fresh air; but the game really does have its attractions. To you the best of health and wishing you good business success, we greet and kiss you with all our hearts, your loving parents and grandparents.*

Edith has gone away to do some shopping, as the school is beginning again next week, otherwise she would have added a few lines herself. In any case she asked me to thank you very much for all your trouble and to send you heartfelt greetings and kisses. Hilde will also soon come home from her work, today again with her weekly salary of 3 Mark, very little but in her heart she is proud of it. Please give regards to our dear relatives…

My grandmother's comment about Edith's affidavit shows that she is still convinced that Edith will get out. But she is far less optimistic when it comes to the rest of the family. They can only wait and see what unfolds. Perhaps they will be fortunate and be allowed into Palestine of Rhodesia. She is relieved that Edith is about to leave, and that her two sons seem to be adjusting to their new lives in Africa. She is also pleased that my father's business seems to be doing well. But the predicament of Siegfried and Hildegard must have continued to weigh very heavily on her.

Cecilie writes to Artur on his birthday on 20 April 1939. She is relieved that he is safe in Northern Rhodesia, but she also misses her youngest son's presence profoundly:

Berlin 20.4.39

My dear good boy! As your birthday is drawing close, I want to send you our most heartfelt congratulations already today, together with the most fervent wishes for your further well-being. The All-Merciful should above all grant you the best and on-going good health, and may you find a happy home in the far-away continent, where you will experience the fullest contentment and the fulfilment of the dreams of your yearning. For us it is not a pleasant feeling to know that you will be so alone on that day, but my thoughts will be with you. We will sit at the birthday table with coffee and cake, your photo in the middle and celebrate your special day and you will be with us in spirit. How time flies, you have been away for ¾ years by now, perhaps God means well with us and will unite us again in peace. Still, a tear has fallen on the paper, but it is a tear of joy and I am happy ….

Cecilie's words to Artur on his birthday are particularly poignant. The last line starts as a lament but then morphs into an expression of joy.

By then, daily life for Jews must have been unbearable. After Kristallnacht, to rub salt into their wounds, Hitler demanded that Jews pay one billion marks to "atone" for the damage to property during the pogroms. This was to be paid through various punitive taxes. Kristallnacht must have struck at the very core of German Jews' sense of being. The

recognition that the state had orchestrated the violence, and then blamed this on the victims, must have been devastating for those Jews who still held out a glimmer of hope that decency and civilised behaviour would prevail. Although opportunities for leaving Germany rapidly diminished after Kristallnacht, Cecilie's letters indicate that family members were increasingly frantic in their efforts to leave.

As late as May 1939, only a few months before the outbreak of the war, Cecilie writes to my father informing him of all the immigration efforts of relatives, and his father's upcoming birthday celebrations.

Berlin 12. 5. 39

… Siegfried, thank God, is looking very well and also feels well. Today he will probably come here. Perhaps Aunt Frieda will emigrate to Bolivia. Her niece who went there for Christmas will apply on her behalf, as the husband is earning well as a shoemaker. What do you think with regard to Uncle Hermann, can something be achieved there? For the time being he is learning to clean clothes. I have already learned to sew collars and could open a business with this, which could be very lucrative. Edith can also sew leather gloves, which is very profitable as well, should there be a demand. This week dear father met Mrs Israel in the street… They are running about with regard to [emigration] taxes and this greatly delays the departure. Is Miss Bloch still in the Union [of South Africa]? Willy Pich is in Shanghai; but he is not well. He will try to stay above water by sewing shirts. His bride, a widow with an eight-year-old boy followed him last week. On Tuesday dear father will celebrate his birthday and he has invited his skat friends, and this will hopefully be very cosy. Also a diversion…

The final paragraph of this letter expresses Cecilie's desperate desire for sons to be happy and successful in their new homes far away in Africa. Now that Artur looks set to marry, she jests about "*consulting a match maker for Herbi*". But, lurking beneath this playful repartee about finding a wife for my father, I read signs of imminent catastrophe:

With the next chance I will go and consult a [marriage] broker. Perhaps she has a suitable partner for you. It must be something very special for our Herbi. I have told you or Artur that Jews are to live in Jewish houses; but it is not so urgent yet. First the landlord or the government agency has to have organized a house in which the Jews are accommodated, and I am not worrying about that as yet, especially because Edith will hopefully come out soon…

Again, the brief sentence, *"Jews are to live in Jewish houses"*, is a coded message. My grandmother must surely have seen this as yet another ominous sign of what was to come. But she could not afford to think like this. She could not give up hope. She had to believe that Edith would get out safely, and she had to trust that their landlord would be decent and protect her family from the threat of eviction. She had little choice but to believe that there were still some good Germans left. She could not afford to give up on her belief that goodness would ultimately prevail. I try to desist from reading my grandmother's words with the full knowledge of what was to come. But I cannot help seeing signs of foreboding everywhere. I am not even sure whether she really believed that "the good Germans" would help them in their time of need. Yet, as the solid matriarch of the Robinski family, she had to hold onto her faith. If she didn't, all would be lost.

Although I learnt about my family's fate at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C in December 1996, it was only after I stumbled across the letters in 2013 that I began to grasp how Kristallnacht and the relentless waves of racial laws systematically stripped Jews of the last vestiges of their dignity. Cecilie's seemingly unshakable religious conviction and relentless capacity to hope were the only resources she had to keep the family intact. She tried to protect her two sons in Africa from the burden of knowing what their parents and siblings were really going through. Even had she had wanted to convey this to her sons, the fear of the Nazi censors loomed over her as she sat down to write these messages from hell. Trying desperately to remain hopeful, while staring down into the void, was Cecilie's burden.

FIFTEEN

THE TRAGEDY OF TRIAGE

Political philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Georgio Agamben identify the foundation of nation state sovereignty in the capacity of the sovereign to make decisions about who to let live and who to let die. But what happens when something analogous to this is perceived to reside within the family, or within in the hands of a single individual, in this case a family member who has succeeded in securing refuge in a safe country. The relatives who are left behind may perceive this person as holding the key to their lives. But if all of the family members cannot be saved, which ones are then to be chosen? There may even be a need to exercise a tragic type of selection process whereby a decision is made to try to rescue the youngest, the most educated, or the family member with the best business acumen and skills, the one who is likely to become a successful immigrant. In the case of my father, the letters from Berlin suggest that he was seen to have the qualities of the successful emigrant, the one who would be able to save them. But they overestimated his ability to rescue them, and he had to live with the consequences of his failure.

In times of war and emergencies, doctors and medical orderlies have had to resort to medical triage and make decisions about who to save and who to let die. Here the imperatives of getting injured and ill soldiers back to the frontline as fast as possible can lead to decisions about which lives to prioritise for treatment. Dr Vinh Kim Nguyen, a Canadian medical anthropologist and HIV clinician, has written about HIV and triage in West Africa in the 1990s, at a time when antiretroviral therapy was not yet available in the public health systems of most African countries. Based on his first-hand experiences as an HIV physician in Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire, Dr Nguyen writes about how practices of triage and sovereignty colluded in shaping access to HIV treatment. In such settings, articulate persons living with AIDS, and those who could produce powerful testimonials about HIV, were recruited by NGOs as community health workers. These NGOs in turn facilitated access to treatment. Because NGOs and donors needed these articulate HIV-positive individuals in the war against the pandemic, they tacitly encouraged a form of triage whereby certain lives were assigned more value than others. It was on this basis that decisions were made about who deserved access to these life-enhancing drugs. A different, but somewhat analogous, process seemed to take place within my father's family in Berlin in the 1930s.

A tragic type of triage unfolded within the Robinski family. The first to leave Germany was my father. This must have made perfect sense to the family. He had experience working as a salesman and buyer for a big departmental store in Erfurt. He would be able to get the finances to leave and he would also be able to establish himself relatively quickly in the new country, and from there he would be in a position to help the rest of the family escape. Next in line was his younger brother Artur. My father managed to find him work as a store man in Rhodesia, even though Artur had at first hoped to immigrate to South Africa. When Artur arrived in Cape Town in October 1938, he found that in terms of the 1937 Aliens Act he did not qualify to reside in South Africa, and he was given three months before he had to depart for Northern Rhodesia where, at that stage, immigration legislation was still less stringent. Both my father and Artur then turned their attention to trying to get Edith out. It was assumed that she would succeed because she was a young, qualified teacher. Great effort was made to try and facilitate her passage to safety. The oldest brother Siegfried was an industrial worker; by the late 1930s, my grandmother no longer held out much hope for him. Hildegard and my grandparents were the least likely to succeed.

My grandparents were initially hopeful that my father could be able to bring the entire family to South Africa. But, on 12 May 1939, Cecilie writes to my father in a far less hopeful state.

Berlin, 12.5.1939

My dear Herbi

I have received your letter from 28.4 on time with Artur's post and I was glad to read about your well-being. So, do you have the intention to expand [your business]? Good luck! Thank God that good Artur is happy there as well and that he copes with the climate there. You will have received our date of births already, and I now will add our [wedding date] 4.10.1904 in Strasburg. In case you need documentation, I am able to send you photocopies. Everything is good and well, but I cannot let Hilde stay in Hachshara. I was with her at the Palestine Consulate yesterday and have discovered that there are so many ahead of her on the list that it will take at least 4 months, until new requests will be processed. They also prefer highly intellectual people, who have been previously been active in Zionistic circles. A hopeless situation for Hilde. I have thought about this often. The only solution would be if Edith gets to Rhodesia. It would be terrible for me should she [Hilde] stay with strangers, because she

requires a lot of attention. There must also be a solution for people like her. Nothing final has been decided with Siegfried…

The telling sentence *"A hopeless situation for Hilde*", followed by "*There must also be a solution for people like her"*, captures the devastating logic of triage. In the case of Hildegard there was a tragic twist to the story. Hildegard was mentally challenged, and her mother was convinced that she could not be left on her own in Germany, and neither could she be sent abroad on her own. And she discovers in the Palestine Office in Berlin that only committed Zionists with organisational affiliations and highly educated Jews - intellectuals, writers, artists, scientists, musicians, businesspeople and – stand any chance of emigration assistance from the Office. Hildegard stood no chance at all. Even if Hildegard were to be accepted to go to Palestine as part of a *Hachshara* Zionist youth preparation programme, she would not cope there on her own. Cecilie writes despairingly, "*There must also be a solution for people like her*". This single sentence reveals the terrifying logic of triage at play here. It is a cruel "lifeboat ethics" that seemed unavoidable given the circumstances.

My grandmother Cecilie (lower left) with three women whom I assume include her sisters Frieda and Hilde.

In a later letter sent to my father from Bolivia on 9 February 1943, Cecilie's sister Frieda spells out the tragic consequences of Hildegard's disability for the family: "*If it wasn't for Hilde, your parents would still have managed to get out, and Edith could have left for sure. Now there is nothing left to do.*" Frieda seems to blame Hildegard's mental frailty for the fate of her siblings and parents. Ute found it particularly painful to learn from Aunt Frieda that my father's parents would definitely have escaped had it not been for the need to take care of Hildegard. As Ute told me, "Your grandmother couldn't send Hilda away or leave her behind. To me this is the opposite of what was happening in Germany. Here your grandparents remained ethical… They said they can't leave Hilda, then Hilda died in Auschwitz and they died in Riga".

Because of the emotional intensity of translating these letters, Ute made the decision to confine her translation work to Thursdays. She would then email the translated letters to me on Fridays, often with an apology for the distress that reading them would cause me. For the rest of the week she tried her best not to think about them. "It was very tough", she said, "I sometimes couldn't sleep at night just thinking, here they were writing these letters, and then they were murdered, perished for nothing. All these [immigration documents] they had to hand in, for nothing".

***

At one point the family had thought that Edith may be able to escape by marrying a Jewish man from Rhodesia. Edith obtained a marriage affidavit, but then, for reasons that I am unaware of, the marriage plans fell through. Cecilie later wrote to my father suggesting that, should Edith get out by other means, her marriage affidavit could then be transferred to Hildegard's name. Again, nothing came of this. By May 1939, it was clear that immigration quotas to Palestine and the US worked according to the cold, calculating logic of a selection system that could only rescue the "best and the brightest". Siegfried stood little chance, Hildegard and my grandparents even less.

By mid-May 1939, there was still no progress with regard to the immigration applications of my father's parents or his siblings. On 20 May 1939 my father received the following letter from a Port Elizabeth firm of attorneys, Herbert Burman & Loon.

20th May, 1939

H. Robins, Eq.,

1, Westbourne Road,

Port Elizabeth

Dear Sir

With reference to the discussion we had with you regarding your desire to assist your parents to immigrate to this country, we do feel that your chances of success in this direction would be magnified if your sister [Edith] could leave Germany before them, so that she would be in a position to obtain employment and to give an undertaking to assist you in the support of your parents, thereby ensuring that even though anything should happen to you, she would support them and thus prevent them from becoming a burden on the Union Government.

Yours faithfully,

Herbert Burman & Loon

A few months later, with war on the horizon, Siegfried writes one of his few letters to my father.

Berlin, 2 June 1939

My dear Herbert

I received two letters in succession … These letters always trigger great feelings of joy, hope and confidence – your last letter was especially an occasion to give rise to these feelings. I am eternally grateful for your help and effort. It is true that it is difficult to make any arrangements from here, which is why, dear boy, we are so thankful that you are supporting us with the process of emigration. I wish to talk about the matter of Chile. You are aware that I have already initiated the plan to immigrate to Australia, but I have not yet heard anything back from them… Edith [Siegfried's wife] has enquired about the living situation in Chile and was told that, both from an economic as well as a climate point of view, things are very good…

Warm regards, your brother Siegfried

Three months before the outbreak of the war, Siegfried still seemed optimistic as he considers emigration options in Australia or Chile if South Africa and Northern Rhodesia do not work out. But, without artisanal certification, he stands little chance of success. Perhaps he even knows this.

In the months before the war started, most Berlin Jews who had the financial means had already left. The Robinski family were, unfortunately, not well off. In a letter dated 10 January 1939, Cecilie tells my father that his Uncle Bernhard and Aunt Minna Rubenstein managed to get all five of their children to safety and that they are "envied" by many. Cecilie then adds that she hopes that all of them will be successful and that their parents will get much joy from them. By then, she probably realises that it is too late for the Robinski family. Like so many other less well-off Jewish families, in the months leading up to the war almost no countries were willing to open their doors to them. Although the Rubenstein children were now safe in Palestine, their parents were in a dire situation. In a letter to my father sent from La Paz, Bolivia, on 9 February 1943, Aunt Frieda writes, "*Aunt Minna and Uncle Bernard escaped to Russia, and it is my hope that when the Germans entered, they moved on into Russia*". The historian Leo Spitzer, whose parents also found refuge in La Paz during the war, read this letter from Aunt Frieda and told me that it would have been futile to have tried to escape through Odessa to Siberia. To do this they would have had to flee through

Transnistria, where they would most probably have been killed either by invading Einsartzgruppen or their Romanian allies. I later discovered that Aunt Minna and Uncle Bernard had indeed perished during the war, but how they died is unknown.

This family tombstone has the names of my grandparents, David and Cecilie Robinski and aunts Edith and Hildegard and uncle Siegfried and his wife Edith. It also includes the names of my grandmother's sisters Minna and Dora and their families. On the back of the photograph is a handwritten sentence: "*I did not put my brother's name as I don't know what happened to his grave*".

One of the countries least likely to accept "ordinary Jews" such as my father's family was the United States. Yet, this was the same country that only a couple of decades earlier had celebrated itself as a place of sanctuary for persecuted refugees and poor immigrants. The 1924 immigration restriction laws made it virtually impossible for German and East European Jews to gain entry into the US. By the late 1930s, as Hitler's intentions became clearer, the US only accepted exceptionally gifted or wealthy Jews. Those who were assisted by well-connected Americans to escape Nazi Europe in the late 1930s had to be distinguished scientists, artists, writers and intellectuals such as Albert Einstein, Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Franz Werfel, Lion Feuchtwanger, Heinrich Mann and Hannah Arendt. Without money or exceptional talent, there was little hope. Diplomats and US State Department officials were anxious to limit Jewish immigration into the United States. There were notable exceptions such as Hiram "Harry" Bingham IV and Varian Fry, but most Foreign Service staff in Vichy France and other parts of occupied Europe followed

State Department instructions and refused to assist "ordinary" Jewish refugees. Exceptions could only be allowed for "special Jews".

The tragedy of being forced to prioritise the rescue of siblings was played out slowly and deliberately. This must have created terrible anguish for my father and Artur. Those family members who had managed to escape to safer lands now had to make agonising decisions about which of their beloved ones to save. They would not have known of the death camps at the time but they knew that life in Berlin was unbearable and getting worse.

These kinds of decisions are routinely made by refugees and migrants fleeing from wars, political violence, earthquakes, famines, poverty and other human and natural disasters. Often the family members back home overestimate the power, influence and agency of the ones they believe will rescue them. Should the safe ones fail, they often have to live the rest of their lives with unbearable guilt. I fear that this may have been my father's fate. I wish I could have told him when he was alive what I now know: that scientists, politicians and immigration policymakers colluded in ways that preordained his failure to rescue Edith and the rest of his family.

.

SIXTEEN

THE SCIENTIFIC PATHWAYS TO DESTRUCTION

It is not at all surprising that Edith was struggling to breathe. She was the only one in the family who seemed to fully grasp that the rest of the world had abandoned Germany's Jews. As we have already seen, by 1924 the US eugenics movement had successfully lobbied Congress for immigration restrictions that prevented European Jews from entering the United States. Although eugenics was an important scientific enterprise in Britain, its influence on immigration policy turned out to be different. In her letters to my father and Artur, Edith expressed the hope that it might still be possible to find household work in London. But did she really believe she would succeed. As it turned out, Britain had its own justification for restricting Jewish immigration.

Left: Portrait of the British eugenics scientist, Karl Pearson, by Elliott & Fry, 1890; Right: Pearson seated on the left with the 87-year old Galton wearing what looks like a Stetson;

In 1925, one of the leading British eugenicists of the early twentieth century, Karl Pearson, co-authored a paper entitled "The Problem of Alien Immigration into Great Britain, Illustrated by an Examination of Russian and Polish Jewish Children". Pearson, the biographer and protégé of Francis Galton, was also the founder of modern statistics. He was a Renaissance man who was passionate about law, science, mathematics, philosophy, German literature, and poetry. Above all, he was determined show that science, and statistics in particular, should be the basis for all government policies and programmes. What is intriguing about Pearson is that he insisted that his work was driven by the quest for scientific truth, not racial prejudice.

Pearson was certainly a man of his times. In the early decades of the twentieth century, eugenics was embraced by scientists and politicians across the political spectrum -

progressives, liberals, socialists, fascists and Nazis. They all shared a fervent belief that eugenics was the appropriate scientific method for improving the wealth, health and welfare of nations. Pearson was a committed nationalist and socialist who had little patience for sentimentality. He believed that there was nothing wrong in evicting indigenous people from their land if this was done in the name of the welfare and improvement of Britain. "No thoughtful socialist", he claimed, "would hesitate to cultivate Uganda at the expense of its present occupiers if Lancashire were starving. Only he would have done this directly and consciously, and not by way of missionaries and exploiting companies." In the aftermath of English military failures against the Boer guerrillas, Pearson called for scientifically based eugenics programmes to improve the British national stock. He was shocked and disappointed that Boer guerrilla fighters had so thoroughly outmanoeuvred British soldiers during the war. He attributed this to the Boers' tactical and military prowess and their superior physique. He was not simply concerned about the inferior and deteriorating mental and physical qualities of the poor and working class in Britain, but of the British nation as a whole. Eugenics was the panacea. As his biographer Theodore Porter writes:

> In the early years of the twentieth century, Pearson spoke of the nation being tested by its war against the Boers and failing, and of the need for a scientific, eugenic socialism to improve its efficiency and restore its fiber. He wrote of the "primary duty of the [Anglo] woman to rear strong and healthy children, and the primary duty of the man to carry arms in its defence." He became a vocal champion of educated professionals as against idle aristocrats and the lazy or incapable poor, and he increasingly naturalized class difference... To those who would challenge this conclusion, imagining there was still a great reserve of ability in the lower classes, he called for quantitative evidence: "Statistics on the table, please" [56]

In his musings on the rise and decline of nations and races, Pearson did not hesitate to accept the inevitability of the elimination of inferior elements; "Mankind as a whole, like the individual, make advances through pain and suffering only. *The path of progress is strewn with the wreck of nations [which are] the stepping stones on which mankind has risen to the higher intellectual and deeper emotional life of today.*"[57] In Pearson's justifications for national eugenics programmes, one cannot help but see the seeds of National Socialism. Pearson, who died in

[56] Porter, 2005, 283
[57] This quote is cited from Theodore M. Porter's definitive biography of Pearson entitled, *Karl Pearson: The Scientific Life in a Statistical Age*, 2005:297, emphasis added.

1934, was not particularly interested in Nazi eugenics. He sought to solve the "Jewish Question" in Britain through less brutal means, the "civilised English way".

'The Jewish Type' by Francis Galton, the founding figure of eugenics
http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/static/images/2217.html

Pearson's 1925 study on Polish and Russian Jewish children[58] is a striking illustration of how, by the first two decades of the last century, eugenics scientists had become obsessed with immigration policy. In 1925, a year after Congress passed the US Immigration Restriction Act, Pearson began an investigation into whether Eastern European Jews exhibited inferior physiological, psychological and intellectual traits and capacities that disqualified them from immigrating to Great Britain. The purpose of the study was "to establish a standard of admission, which would insure that only immigrants of good physique and high mentality gained entrance". East European Jews failed Pearson's standard.[59]

Galton unwittingly contributed towards channelling eugenics down the dark tunnel that ultimately led to the gates of Auschwitz, a destination that he could not have anticipated. Like Grant and Goddard in the US, he too sought to use eugenics to influence immigration policies. But Pearson's eugenics did not have nearly as much influence over

[58] Karl Pearson and Margaret Moul, 1925, *The problem of alien immigration into Great Britain, illustrated by an examination of Russian and Polish Jewish children. Part I.* Published in the Annals of Human Genetics's archive of material originally published in print format by the Annals of Eugenics (1925-1954).

[59] Pearson, who believed that he was simply following rigorous scientific methods of investigation, proceeded to recruit 600 Alien Jewish Children at the Jewish Free School in London. He measured the cleanliness of their hair and clothing compared to Native Gentile Children, and collected masses of data on education, literacy, language, physique, and diseases of the ear, eye, teeth, and heart. His eventual findings led him to conclude that the Alien Jewish Children were indeed inferior to native stock in height, weight, susceptibility to disease, nutrition, visual acuity, and cleanliness. He concluded from his findings that it would not advisable to allow into Britain those Polish and Russian Jews whose physique or mentality was proven to be inferior of the autochthonous white British race.

British immigration policy as was the case of the eugenics movement in the United States. Yet, by the mid-1930s, Britain too began to shut its doors to European Jews.

In the 1880s, Britain, much like the United States and South Africa, had witnessed a massive influx of East Europeans Jews. This flood of Jewish immigrants in all three countries had resulted in a backlash and calls for stricter immigration control. In Britain, this culminated in the Aliens Act in 1905. As was the case in South Africa in the early 1900s, the debate surrounding the Aliens Act stirred up considerable xenophobic and anti-Jewish sentiment. The response of Anglicised Jews was to try even harder to fit in by reforming their religious services, emphasising their Englishness, and pressuring the East European Jews to Anglicise. With the rise to power of the Nazis in 1933, the Anglo-Jewish leadership feared an escalation of anti-Semitism at home. The long history of British anti-Semitism, and fears of its resurgence, led to a cautious response by British Jews to immigration matters. This fear was exacerbated whenever British Jews encountered violent anti-Jewish persecution when travelling abroad. It made them even more nervous and determined to present themselves as loyal British subjects. They felt that needed to show they posed absolutely no threat to Queen and Empire. Because of all of this, the Board of Deputies of British Jews was reluctant to petition Whitehall to open the doors to Palestine, and even actively sought to keep the number of exiles to the country down. This fear of drawing attention to Jewish sectional interests in Britain also led to the Board refusing to lend its support to a boycott of German goods in 1933.[60] These responses directly impacted upon my father's family in Berlin. They were desperately trying to escape and, but for restrictive British immigration policies, Palestine would have been the destination of choice.

The eugenics and immigration restriction policies conspired to trap Jews in Nazi Europe. It began with Goddard's influential 1912 Ellis Island study. The study provided the scientific justification for immigration officials to send back those deemed feebleminded or morons. This was followed, in 1917, by the US army's decision to test 1.75 million World War I recruits with a set of examinations designed by Goddard. These eugenics-based tests had a great influence on immigration policy even though critics pointed out that these tests measured familiarity with the dominant national culture of the United States rather than any objective indicator of intelligence. In *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981), Stephen Jay Gould ridiculed the unscientific character of "these absurd tests, which measured linguistic and cultural familiarity with American ways [and] ranked recent immigrants from southern

[60] Todd M. Endelman, 2002. The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, pp.212-214.

and eastern Europe well below the English, Germans, and Scandinavians who had arrived long before." Since most Jewish immigrants came from Eastern Europe, quotas based on country of origin ended up preventing Jews from entering the United States. When quotas were established for the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, they reduced the influx of Slavs, Italians and Jews to a mere trickle. In his history of scientific racism in America, entitled *The Legacy of Malthus*, Allan Chase writes that the quotas prevented an estimated six million southern, central and eastern Europeans from entering the US from 1924 to 1939. As Stephen Jay Gould concludes in *The Mismeasure of Man*: "We know what happened to many who wanted to leave but had no place to go. *The pathways to destruction are often indirect, but ideas can be agents as surely as guns and bombs"*.[61]

There was indeed such an indirect pathway to destruction when it came to the fate of my Aunt Hildegard. Because she was mentally challenged, she would have stood no chance getting into the United States after the passing of the 1924 immigration restriction laws. In the 1920s, eugenics programmes to prevent feebleminded foreigners from diluting the Nordic national stock spread from the United States to Germany, where they found fertile ground.

Unlike the United States and South Africa, Britain did not enact laws to restrict immigration by racial or national origin. Instead, it was the indifference of politicians and bureaucrats that led to Jewish refugees being denied entry to Britain. In 1940, British fears of a 'fifth column' led to the indiscriminate internment and deportation of European Jews from both Britain and the British Protectorate of Palestine. A.W.G. Randall, head of the Foreign Office Refugee Department, boldly stated in December 1943 that "once we open the door to adult male Jews to be taken out of enemy territory, a quite unmanageable flood may result (Hitler may facilitate it!)".[62] Although Jews made desperate efforts to seek refuge in Palestine, Britain firmly shut the door on them. By 1945, the British government had not even admitted to Palestine the limit of seventy-five thousand immigrants allowed in terms of the White Paper of 1939.[63]

At the time, Britain's priorities were not to rescue Jews but to defeat the enemy. In the name of securing what were perceived to be vital British interests in the Middle East, officials in charge went to great lengths to seal the escape routes. In February 1942, a ship

[61] Stephen Jay Gould, "Science and Jewish Immigration." From: *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes*, W.W. Norton, 1993:8). See Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, W.W. Norton, 1981.
[62] Bernard Wasserstein, 1979. Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945. London & Oxford: Institute of Jewish Affairs and Clarendon Press, p.248.
[63] Michael R. Marrus, 1981, Review of Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945 by Bernard Wasserstein. *The International History Review*, Vol. 3, No.2 (Apr., 1981), pp. 294-296.

called the *Stuma* was towed out to sea from Constantinople with a broken engine after the British refused to accept its passengers who were bound for Palestine; the ship sank and over 700 Jewish refugees drowned. Winston Churchill apparently shared this widespread indifference, if not antipathy, towards Jews and their plight in Nazi Europe. The late historian Tony Judt writes of Churchill that "his wartime intelligence services had kept him appraised of widespread suspicion of Jews, and persistent mutterings to the effect that the war had been fought 'for them'".[64] This led him to suppress any discussion of the Holocaust during the war and censor public debate on whether the Royal Air Force should bomb the death camps. For similar reasons, plans to bomb Auschwitz were scuppered by influential sections of the British civil service. Overt anti-Semitism or eugenics arguments seemed to play little role in these decisions about immigration and refugees; it was more a case of privileging British national and military strategic priorities, which did not include Jewish refugees. [65]

Goddard, Pearson and their colleagues had played their part in laying the scientific foundations for these immigration restrictions, and what was to follow. These eugenics ideas also germinated at Eugen Fischer's Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenic in Berlin. By the time Fischer resigned as Institute director in 1942, a barbaric and lethal science that had incubated in the colonial laboratories of southern Africa had boomeranged back into the heartland of civilised Europe.

[64] Tony Judt (with Timothy Snyder), 2012. *Thinking the Twentieth Century*. William Heinemann: London. p.47
[65] Marrus, 1981, pp. 294-296.

SEVENTEEN

DOORS SLAM SHUT

By 1939, the letters from my father's family in Berlin reveal the growing anxiety amongst family members as they witnessed emigration opportunities closing down everywhere. Some relatives had managed to find the money to leave for England, Sweden, Palestine, Chile, Bolivia, China and southern Africa. Cecilie's letters provide detailed accounts of the plans and predicaments of family members attempting to flee. She once again tells my father that he cannot help all his relatives and that he should concentrate his efforts on his immediate family. She also complains once more about relatives who previously had not helped others financially but were now requesting money, at a time when everyone was struggling. Relationships must have been under enormous strain, and it must have been unbearable to have to make decisions about who to help. Such choices must have taken a terrible toll on families, especially after the war began and emigration opportunities closed down. It is surprising that the letters do not reveal more in terms of family conflicts, though Cecilie's letters do hint at simmering conflict between herself and Edith, and between David and Siegfried's wife (Edith II). Despite these tensions, Cecilie somehow managed to maintain the social fabric of the Robinski family.

***

On a few occasions Ute expressed concern about my well-being. She did not underestimate emotional and psychological effects of reading the letters. But I was also concerned about her. She was deeply unsettled by the letters, especially the ones from Edith and Cecilie. She read these letters in the original German, and with full knowledge of what awaited the writers. I tried to convince her, and myself, that I would cope. I had also inherited my father's capacity to shut painful emotions away in the black box. Perhaps, by reading the letters in English, a linguistic and emotional distance was created that made it easier for me. I felt cushioned from the emotional rawness. It was Ute who entered more intimately into the inner worlds of Cecilie and Edith. My scholarly dispositions and habits, cultivated over decades, ensured an emotional distance, a safe buffer. Yet I still had no way of knowing in advance how I would be affected by this deep immersion into this world. There was no way of knowing whether I was in control.

***

By the middle of 1939, Jews could only sit on yellow-marked park benches at Bayerischer Platz in Berlin, they could not use the public beach at Wannsee, they could not enter the public service, they were forbidden from universities and barred from professions, and they could no longer own or run retail shops or mail order businesses or work as independent craftsmen. Jews also had to declare their incomes and property "to ensure that these assets are used in the best interest of the German economy". Jewellery owned by Jews made of gold, silver, platinum or pearls had to be handed to the state, and jewellery and other valuables owned by Jews could not be taken out of the country by emigrants. But this was not all: they could not own radios, they could not own pets, they could only buy groceries between certain hours. The list of prohibitions must have seemed endless: they could no longer receive ration cards for clothing, they could not belong to sports groups or choral groups, they could not attend cinemas, theatres, opera houses or concert halls, and Jewish authors could not participate in literary activities; Jews could not work as actors and actresses, rental agreements with Jews could be terminated without giving reasons, and Jews could be sent to "Jewish houses". There were numerous other racial ordinances that prevented them from having vaguely normal lives. These included curfews whereby Jews were not allowed to leave their apartments after 8 p.m. (9 p.m. during the summer). It is therefore not surprising that the letters from Berlin consisted of detailed descriptions of family members' desperate efforts to emigrate.

My grandmother's letter to my father dated 9 June 1939 yet again informs him of the progress the family are making with their immigration applications:

Berlin, 9.6.39

My dear good boy! This week we have received 2 letters from you and we are very happy that you are well thank God, health wise and also with regard to your business. Our good God should just help you to further good, that your wishes may be fulfilled and that we can still be together in joy for a few years. We have received the affidavit yesterday and dear father drove to the Israels to gather information [about immigration to South Africa]. The Israels will probably leave here [for Port Elizabeth] in 8 days, should they get a place on the English ship… The papers from the Tiergartenstrasse [the South African Consulate in Berlin] have to be requested in writing and we have already written to them. Then the medical examination is to follow… Hopefully everything will work out. I will notify you continuously about the further developments. About us you, my dear Herbi, do not need to have any great anxieties, neither with regard to the apartment, nor with regard to livelihood.

Mr Völker is very decent and has not yet mentioned anything about giving notice etc. Also there is rent control for every Jew, no Jew remains without lodging…

Despite Cecilie's ceaseless efforts to reassure her sons in Africa that the family were still coping, her words betray her, revealing suppressed feelings of despair and foreboding.
I have visited the recently constructed large, modern, concrete and glass building of the South African Consulate in Berlin's fashionable Tiergartenstrase, where the Robinski family must have submitted their numerous immigration documents, medical certificates and photographs. This space must have loomed large in their minds as their lives depended on the decisions made there, and in offices in Pretoria. But back in South Africa, my father must have been aware that the 1937 Aliens Act had all but destroyed their chances of success.

South African Consulate in Tiergartenstrase, Berlin, 2013

After informing my father that the family were doing all they could to emigrate, Cecilie once again mentions the new racial ordinance that requires that Jews live in "Jewish houses". Again, she does not go into much detail about this new law, and tries to reassure my father that the landlord, Mr. Völker, is "very decent" and will not evict them. She tells my father that he does "not need to have any great anxieties, neither with regard to the apartment, nor with regard to livelihood". The rest of the letter is packed with the minutiae of emigration efforts and news about family members.

With dark clouds of war gathering on the horizon, Cecilie writes to my father in the middle of June.

Berlin 15.6.39

My dear Herbie! This week I have not received a letter from you and assume that within the next few days post will arrive. I do not have much news to impart to you today. We had applied for the questionnaires at the consulate and have received them the next day. As dear

father has caught a cold this week we want to try to undergo the [medical] examinations next week, and if the results in father's medical certificate are positive, then we will obtain the other necessary papers. Tomorrow we want to visit the Israels, as they will now depart from here this coming Sunday, and we want to keep ourselves informed about various matters. Uncle Hermann should be discharged from the hospital today, as he was operated on the bladder eight days ago. Hopefully everything will go well with him, and I will visit him tomorrow. Last Sunday I visited him in hospital and at the same time did a detour to Meta [Cohen], as her flat is also in the hospital. There is little hope that she will be able to emigrate and they are already very despondent. But many others are in the same boat. Also Henny does not know where to go. Next week Albert will start work at the building site, he must earn a livelihood. Meta wants to send you a picture of her little daughter. She is a sweet child….

The letter seems to mirror the frenetic and desperate realities of daily life for my grandmother and those around her. Cecilie lurches from reports on ill health and immigration to news about birthday parties and the purchase of Edith's new blue dress, from a request to my father to send money to relatives in Palestine, to Artur's life in Ndola and my father's business in Port Elizabeth. The mood jumps jarringly from darkness and despair to lightness and frivolous banter.

This letter is riddled with partially repressed anxieties. "*Everyone is in need of care [and] everything is barred*," she writes. The more desperate things become the more demands for help pile up for my father. Cecilie asks him to assist the two Holz brothers, Manfred and Egon, who have managed to escape to Palestine, but who are without money. The question of whom to help is becoming increasingly fraught. Again, my grandmother seems doubtful that Siegfried will get out: "*Like the thousands of other young people, we must wait for something to happen with regard to his emigration.*" Later in the letter she writes, "*Siegfried has also not made any progress and we can only hope for the best*". But what is she hoping and waiting for? Is my devout grandmother praying for a miracle? What are the limits of her faith and optimism?

This letter is deeply disturbing to read. Everyone my grandmother refers to seems vulnerable and despondent. It is less than three months before the start of the war and Siegfried, like so many other family members, has no escape plan. Cecilie still tries to reassure my father, "*About us you do not have to worry. For the time being we are still living undisturbed.*" After this unconvincing reassurance, she turns to sombre and ominous

developments that Edith has already alluded to in earlier correspondence: school children have nowhere to go for their holidays because of a racial ordinance prohibiting Jews from entering parks, woods and other public spaces: "*Soon the holidays will start but one has nowhere to go. The school children will spend the holidays on the school grounds, there is no place anywhere outside.*" Predictably, she immediately switches tack: "*Yesterday was skat day in our house, and [your father] lost 1,05 mark; but last time he won 1,65 mk.*" She then inquires about my father's health and his business: "*Now enough about us. How are you my dear boy? Hopefully you are well and the new branch will develop*". And, after this dizzying flight from one topic to the next, she turns her attention to Artur's predicament in Northern Rhodesia:

> *This week we also received post from dear Artur. Thank God he is feeling well, which is always the most important thing. Today I have sent off the tablets which he requested and the collar stiffeners as sample without value. I feel so sorry for the poor boy, that he has to live so alone there, without any relatives. He was so used to family life, I am thinking of him all the time with the hope of seeing him again in joy. He should only stay well then everything will be fine again.*

Artur is still unmarried and living in the small Copperbelt town of Ndola, where he has no relatives. Cecilie regards her youngest son as more vulnerable that his older brother, who has established his business and who has the three daughters of his uncle Eugen close at hand in Port Elizabeth. But she knows that her family trapped in Berlin are the ones who are really vulnerable.

Throughout this topsy-turvy letter, my grandmother nervously flits from one thing to the next: from reporting on the family's dire predicament in Berlin, to trying to assure her sons with the familiar refrain, "*About us, you do not have to worry.*" Then, in the middle of it all, comes the disturbing comment, "*Edith has enclosed a few lines; but what she has written is so very inconsequential*". Edith writes:

> *Dear Heppchen! I cannot tell you anything of significance. In school, children are leaving daily, and after the holidays classes will be amalgamated because 50% are pol. (?) (Polish) children who have to get out within a very short space of time. On Tuesday I will go to the women's agency because of England. If someone organises a position from E. then it works out faster. Many jobs are available if one makes the efforts on one's own over there; From here not much is being done. Next week the long holidays are beginning, but I am not*

participating in the holiday colony because one is not even out in the fresh air. Our children do not have much here. Otherwise nothing new. Wishing you all the best, health and business success. Perhaps there will be a good outcome regarding the household job in N.Rh. [Northern Rhodesia]
More heartfelt greetings, your Edith.

Why does Cecilie consider what her daughter writes to my father to be inconsequential? What family tensions and frustrations are at play here? Even though Edith herself begins her note to my father with the sentence, *"I cannot tell you anything of significance"*, I find that what she writes is of enormous significance. The Kindertransport children are leaving in large numbers daily, which signals an abrupt end to her teaching career and her livelihood. For the remaining school children daily life is equally bleak; they cannot even go to the woods, lakes and parks of Berlin during their vacations. How can my grandmother be so dismissive of Edith's despondent, but realistic, assessment of where things were heading? It would seem that my grandmother was unwilling and unable to acknowledge her daughter's dark presentiments. But Cecilie's letters, especially those written in the months leading up to the war, cannot completely submerge her repressed anxieties. Her capacity to remain hopeful, buttressed by her unwavering religious conviction, must have strengthened the family's capacity to absorb the daily blows, the indignities and threats to their very existence. It also must have been an enormous burden for my grandmother to have to bury her own feelings of dread in order to present a brave exterior.

On 1 July 1939, Cecilie once more reassures my father once again that the family are working hard at making immigration possible.

Berl. 1. 7. 39

My dear Herbi! Today I must reply to two of your letters, as dear Artur received post from me and it is forwarded to you in any case. First of all, I want to tell you about myself, as you will by now be curious to know how far the necessary papers have progressed. So far everything went smoothly and we have got them together within one week. Health certificate, certificate of good conduct, testimonial of character and certificate of impecunity ("Mittellosenbescheinigung"). Next week the papers go to the translator and Edith has connections there. We still have to have photographs taken and in hardly 8 days the papers can be sent to Pretoria, after first submitting them to the Consulate. We have also settled our

> *capital levy and have had troubles [with this] as the other rich people [had]. ----- Now we must wait for the decision. This week Mrs Neumann was at the Aid Society (Hilfsverein) and she will also soon land in P.E. The Israels will probably arrive there during the next week. Now my dear boy, we thank you most sincerely for the little picture you sent. We were very happy about it and you look like a real boss in the midst of your staff. May God keep you in the best of health and give you happiness and His blessing on your undertakings, so that we will still have much joy in you as well as the other dear children. Do you drive a lot in your new car? Will it be big enough when you will fetch us at the harbour ----- Dear Artur probably waits with longing for Siegfried because of Edith. Nu, hopefully this time he will have more luck and Edith already has travel-nerves. Yesterday the long holidays have started and she has gone to Strausberg for a holiday today. She needs this and I have my peace while she is away... Siegfried comes here daily for lunch, Edith dines in the Aid Society (Hilfsverein) in the canteen. The boy looks well thank God and he has not yet heard anything from Australia. Perhaps news will come one of these days. Now they are all stuck because they are not being accommodated anywhere, and they must wait with patience. Today I have nothing special to impart and it is time to eat as every Friday. The family is getting smaller and smaller and we are today only 3 persons at the table, as Edith has departed at midday. We further wish you the best of health and a very good business. Many tender regards and kisses from us all your loving parents and brothers and sisters...*
> *All the relatives send their regards. When you write to dear Artur, do not forget to send heartfelt greetings and kisses. Hopefully he will soon be able to send me good news.*

"Do you drive a lot in your new car? Will it be big enough when you will fetch us at the [Port Elizabeth] harbour", my grandmother quips. She adds, *"Edith already has travel-nerves."* She tells my father about relatives who have succeeded in immigrating - Mrs. Neuman and the Israel family are already on their way to South Africa. She teases my father about the photograph he sent her of him standing with his employees: "*You look like a real boss in the midst of your staff*". It is unnerving to read all of this knowing what happened. My grandmother conveys a sense of confidence that the immigration applications will be successful. She tells my father that all the paperwork has gone smoothly and will soon be submitted to the authorities. Yet, lurking beneath all this confidence and light banter lies doubt. Despite all her optimism, she ends the letter with the downhearted comment: "*The family is diminishing more and more, and today we are only 3 persons at the table*".

My father's family dutifully complied with all the paperwork requirements. They had a blind faith in bureaucratic procedures and officialdom. They managed to get all the required health certificates, certificates of good conduct, testimonials of character and tax certificates. Yet, my grandmother still seems doubtful that Siegfried will be successful. She also notes that many of their relatives have made little progress: "*Now they are all stuck because they are not being accommodated anywhere, and they must wait with patience.*"

On 17 July, Cecilie tells my father that she joined Edith for a two-week holiday in "Strausberg". It is not clear whether this is Strasburg in France or the small Polish town that the family originally came from.

Berlin, 17.7.39

My dear Herbi!

We have received your dear letter of the 17/6 and hope that you are well, which we can thank God also report about ourselves. You will probably have learned from dear Artur that I have been on holiday in Strausberg for 14 days together with Edith and returned yesterday evening. It was very nice there and I am thoroughly tanned. We slept in a living alcove and paid 9 mark per week. I cooked for the two of us and therefore the stay was cheap. Hilde also came there for the weekend, about which she was very pleased and in these 3 days turned as brown as a mulatto. Father cooked his own meals and he had fun…. Now, to another subject. We have the papers together so far, as we still have to wait for the [testimonial and character] reports, which are also necessary for this. Tomorrow dear father will take all papers to be translated and we will then deliver them to the consulate, which will be sent from there to Pretoria for the decision. I hope that the expenses were not in vain.

Edith II [Siegfried's wife] will make an application today at the Aid Society with regard to Australia, which was opened for artisans without having to produce money, now one must wait and hope again. Yesterday evening Siegfried [visited] and found that I have had a very good rest, no wonder, resting and lazing around in garden and forest air.

Uncle Herman [Holz] is not better and he is quite despondent, with pains and expenses adding to his problems. Uncle Isi [Robinski] from Königsberg came to Berlin yesterday and has visited us today. He looks very well; but he is very unhappy that he has not yet found the possibility to leave the country. He does have an affidavit to N. America but [there is] a long waiting period… Uncle Max [Robinski] will go to Holland in three weeks… I have already had 1 hour's lesson in English… Tomorrow Siegfried wants to take a photo of us and we will then send you a picture. Now I will close, as father has just returned from the skat club

and I must see to supper. Stay well, a good Parnohse [livelihood] and very heartfelt greetings and kisses from your loving parents and brothers and sisters as well as relatives. Today a letter arrived from Uncle Adolf that he hears nothing from Liesbeth Merkel, he should write again. One cannot always help everyone.

Like so many of the letters of this period, my grandmother flits from one topic to the next. Reading between the lines, I detect a growing jitteriness, a nervousness that she can no longer contain despite her determination to come across as hopeful and in control of family matters. But she still refuses to collapse into a state dejection. She tells my father that she is learning English to prepare for emigration to South Africa, and that the family's immigration documents still have to be translated before they can be sent to Pretoria. She then reports on the deep despondency of both Uncle Hermann Holz and my father's paternal uncle, Isidore Robinski from Konigsberg, neither of whom seem to be making any progress with emigration. In an earlier letter to my father sent on 1 July 1939, she had told him that he cannot assist all his relatives: "We had a letter from Uncle Isi [dore] and he wants the relatives [in Port Elizabeth] to help him. Let him make the efforts himself. You can't apply yourself for all the relatives and you have enough on your own platter". Ten days later she writes that "Uncle Herman [Holz] is not better and quite despondent, with pains and expenses adding to his problems. Uncle Isi from Königsberg came to Berlin yesterday and has visited us today. He looks very well; but he is very unhappy that he has not yet found the possibility to leave the country." She concludes this dispiriting letter by reminding my father once again that "one cannot always help everyone". The pressure on my father must have been relentless.

Even though his mother had advised him to assist his own family first, he received a letter from his cousin Egon pleading for help. What was he to do?

Kaunas 7. ? 39

Dear Cousin

I have just received your address from my father and request the following from you: I am today in a terrible situation as I have lost my livelihood for the second time and will also in the foreseeable future lose my right of residence. So briefly: I am totally finished. But as I have heard, Artur has landed in Rhodesia. I am asking you now to send me his address so that he can send a permit for myself and my wife and also for my brother-in-law and his wife. We

have money, he does not have to lay out anything. As you know I was employed as a dentist in Heydekrug in the district of Memel (East Prussia) this has been terminated now.
Artur knows everything about me as he has visited me. So send the address of Artur by return post, sometimes only a letter from him would suffice, [in which he states] that he wants to have us with him, then we will get an entry visa.
So help us and write to us the address.
Egon Robinski
And Erna
Kaunas

In the months leading up to the outbreak of the war, the Robinski family were still exploring options in Australia, Bolivia, Chile, South Africa, England, Palestine, the United States and even China. They continued trying to navigate their way through the maze of bureaucratic red tape. Cecilie's letter to my father on 28th July once again advises him to concentrate his efforts on helping his siblings:

Uncle Isi [from] Königsberg was here 14 days ago and told us that he has written to you, asking that you approach the relatives [in Port Elizabeth] on his behalf; That is a very tall order, as he knows that they do not want to give anything [financially] and that you still have siblings here, on whose behalf you will apply yourself. Lieselotte (Holland) has promised him money, Liesbeth Merkel has also offered him 10 Pounds, and in addition he does not yet know where to go. He still has his house and he does not suffer deprivation; he is just afraid that he possibly will have to do compulsory work.

By the end of July, one month before the outbreak of the war, it must have felt hopeless. Yet, as always, Cecilie tried to be hopeful, even though options for her children, especially Siegfried, seemed to be diminishing daily. On the 28th July she writes to my father, updating him about immigration developments:

Berlin, 28.7.39

My dear Herbi! Today I want to reply to your last letter, because through my writing to dear Artur, each one of you receives post every 14 days, and we are always pleased if we hear that both of you are well, thank God… As already mentioned, our papers are arriving at the consulate at the beginning of the week, as they first must be certified by the expert. The school

> *reports have delayed the submission very much… Werner has yesterday gone to Sweden on Hachshara with 20 children and the boy was completely happy. Aunt Frieda has equipped him like a bride. Perhaps she will succeed to get to Bolivia, for which 150 dollars is required, which she already has. Uncle Herman is still sick and I will visit him tomorrow, perhaps he is already better. To go to Australia will probably be difficult for Siegfried, as only artisans with authorized trade examination [certificates] are considered. One can enter Chile with 300 dollars and we will write next week to father's relatives in Texas. Perhaps they will be of some assistance to us for his emigration…*

In a letter written to Artur three days later, Cecilie vents her frustration with Edith's fatalistic attitude. My grandmother mentions Siegfried's diminishing prospects. Reports on the circumstances of other relatives are equally disheartening. But my grandmother ends on a cheerful note by sending greetings and congratulations to her son's bride (the marriage never took place and Artur was only to marry many years later):

> *About Siegfried I am not able to write anything positive, since Australia only prefers artisans with trade examination [certificates]. Cilly Goldschmidt and family are still in the emigration camp in Argentine and were expelled. They will return to Chile, where they arrived after landing. Werner is now in Sweden on Hachshara. Jutta Kissmann is going to England this Saturday, to work as a domestic. And with our Edith nothing has been achieved as yet, because she does not try. You have always spoiled her and now she is missing your habit of excusing her from doing anything. I can't do anything for her and am letting everything take its course…. Erving Schneter is in Belgium. He wanted to go to Czechoslovakia illegally but he was detained and had to go to prison for several months. Now he is sitting there in Belgium in the emigration camp. Finished for today, because I have to see to lunch and then I am going with Aunt Frida to buy mezies [bargains]; because today the season sale begins. Father has bought himself a beautiful felt hat for 3,55 mark at Tietz.*
> *Once again the best wishes for your happiness and blessing for your further wellbeing and heartfelt greetings and kisses from your parents who love you, and from your brothers and sisters. The relatives send you their congratulations. Best greetings and congratulations I send to your dear bride.*

Two weeks later, on 14 August 1939, Cecilie writes to inform Artur that the family are "living here very peacefully". The sentence that follows is portentous: "*One does not know what the near future will bring us.*" It is one month before war will be declared. "*Our papers have been handed in to the local consulate almost 14 days ago and we hope that they will soon go off to Pretoria,*" she writes. A fortnight later, the outbreak of war rendered all of this paperwork pointless.

On 19 August, my grandmother writes to my father to update him about developments at home, including Siegfried's birthday celebrations and, as always, immigration matters.

Berlin, 19. 8. 39

My dear Herbie!

We have received your dear letter this week, together with 2 letters from dear Artur, and Artur has received a letter on Tuesday, and today (Friday) you will receive a few lines from me. You already know that we sent the papers off 14 days ago to the consulate, and it takes its time until they are attended to. It can still take a few months. Hopefully there will be no interference. Today we have received your letter from Walter, and Edith wants to find out tomorrow what papers she will require for this, and she will then inform you of all the details. Otherwise everything here is as usual. We have celebrated Siegfried's birthday very cosily. Aunt Frida has baked a cake for the occasion and has given as a present ½ a dozen handkerchiefs. I still had a beautiful morning jacket from Artur and your breeches with [long knee]-socks, that was our birthday present, and his mother-in-law brought pyjamas and new socks.

The boy looks, touch wood, very well, but with regard to his emigration there is little prospect. Uncle Herman's health is at the moment quite satisfactory, but he also has no prospects of emigration anywhere, and he has to report daily until his departure. Aunt Minna [Rubenstein] also writes without hope about obtaining a certificate. So everywhere one has to have patience and perseverance. Your last letter was opened officially. Now winter has come to you in Africa you should a warm pullover, previously it did not seem to have been that cold. So the world has changed and the people as well. Here the days are still quite hot, but not for long anymore; because in four weeks' time we will have Rosh Hashana and will go to the synagogue in the Heidereuter Street because in Kaiser Street no services are held anymore… For you a wife will also be found, even if a bit later. You will not remain a bachelor forever,

we will hopefully celebrate your wedding together in peace. How is the business and has the second business yet had any success? Today I do not have much to relate and the next letter will be longer. Good health and wishing you good Parnose [reward, livelihood] greetings and kisses to you with all our hearts your loving parents and siblings.
Regards to all the relatives.

"*So everywhere one has to have patience and perseverance.*" But how can one persevere when there is no air to breathe? Her next sentence must have been especially disturbing for my father, "*Your last letter was officially opened.*" This is followed by a remark about winter in Africa and the need for my father to buy a warm pullover. Then comes the chilling line: "*So the world has changed and the people as well,*" followed by a matter of fact report that services will no longer be held at the Kaiser Street Synagogue. I am shattered by what lies buried beneath these short, staccato sentences. Her words seem saturated with sinister portents.

This letter conveys my grandmother's growing weariness. But she could not afford to show any outward signs of succumbing to these leaden sensations. She had to be strong and hopeful at all times. She also had to be vigilant and watch every word she wrote. Her letters are written in a code that hides more than it reveals. I see patterns in her writing. She typically drops a bombshell in a short sentence, and then immediately follows up with a mundane, often light-hearted, observation - on the cold weather in Africa, the hot weather in Berlin, birthday parties, religious celebrations, my grandfather's skat games, my father's business and marriage prospects, and so on. There is so much that remains unsaid. She ends her letter of 19 August on an optimistic note: "*For you a wife will be found, even if happens a bit later. You will not remain a bachelor forever, we will hopefully celebrate your wedding together in peace.*" The war was now only days away and Cecilie would never see peace in Germany again. The following year my father was admitted to the TB sanatorium in Nelspoort in the Northern Cape for four years; marriage would have to wait until 1955, a decade after the war ended.

EIGHTEEN

OPTIMISM AND DESPAIR

In 1943, two years after she immigrated to the United States, Hannah Arendt reflected on her experiences as a German Jewish refugee. The essay, "We Refugees", was published in a small Jewish journal, *Menorah.* Whereas my grandmother tried to hold onto hope in the face of daily threats to Jewish survival, Arendt writes about refugees who had fled Nazi terror and were living in the United States in the early 1940s:

> Our optimism is indeed admirable, even if we say so ourselves. The story of our struggle has finally become known. We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings. We left our relatives in the Polish ghettoes and our best friends have been killed in concentration camps, and that means the rupture of our private lives.[66]

For Arendt, this experience of loss is completely political, and in "We Refugees" she stresses the need to avoid the sentimentality of private feelings, melancholia, mourning, despair or optimism, all of which she regards as a dangerous withdrawal from the world. This withdrawal, she argues, makes it impossibly difficult to respond politically to existing conditions. She is particularly critical of Jewish refugees in the US who resort to "false optimism" and forced happiness, which ultimately often gives way to complete hopelessness and deep despair and, in some cases, suicide. "Their optimism is the vain attempt to keep their head above water. Behind this kind of cheerfulness, they constantly struggle with despair themselves. Finally, they die of a kind of selfishness."[67] In her review of Arendt's essay, the scholar Samantha Hill writes that, for Arendt, such attempts by refugees to forget, to be silent about what happened, to desperately embrace the new home and nationality - to "not be Jews" – was both politically impotent and a denial of the reality of their lives and their traumatic experiences. This denial often led to a rejection of the world. While the private domain of the home or inner self could provide a temporary sanctuary

[66] Arendt, Hannah, 1943. "We Refugees". *Menorah.* p.263.
[67] Ibid, p. 268.

from the threats of a dangerous world, Arendt felt that this was not a politically viable solution.[68] Engaging in public, political life was seen to be a far healthier response.

Arendt's observations do not seem to apply to Jews, such as my father's family, who became internal refugees in Germany in the 1930s. By the mid-1930s, they had been thoroughly stripped of all citizenship rights, much like stateless refugees. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that Cecilie resorted to desperate optimism. Her repeated references to the jokes and laughter at skat evenings sought to both reassure her sons in Africa and make her own fears, vulnerability and loss more bearable. Cecilie had no choice but to turn to hope and conviction. She believed that God would protect her and her family.

Was my grandmother participating in the kind of "reckless optimism" that Arendt questions? I believe that sheer survival required holding onto faintest of glimmers of hope. Jewish refugees in the United States, England or South Africa had more choices once they found sanctuary. For Cecilie it was a day-to-day struggle just to survive. As a mother she had to keep hoping that her children would escape. I have no idea how my grandfather responded. All I have are a few lines from him at the end of Cecilie's letters.

I doubt Arendt would have labelled my grandmother's responses as reckless optimism. Arendt's criticisms and frustrations targeted Jewish refugees in the United States who, in the face of catastrophic loss, turned away from what was happening in the world. They feigned unbridled optimism in public while living privately in a state of deep despair. For Arendt, both hope and despair are inextricably tied to the loss of one's self, and to the conditions that make life bearable in this world. To turn to "blind optimism" or "reckless despair" involved a denial of loss that inhibited interacting in the world: "The less we are free to decide who we are or to live as we like, the more we try to put up a front, to hide the facts, to play roles".[69] She later expanded on this in the preface to her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: "The central events of our time are no less effectively forgotten by those committed to a belief in an unavoidable doom, than by those who have given themselves up to a reckless optimism… This book has been written against a background of both reckless optimism and reckless despair. It holds that Progress and Doom are two sides of the same metal; that both are articles of superstition, not of faith".[70] Arendt had strong political reasons for being frustrated with the façade of hope and unbridled optimism of Jewish refugees in the US in the early 1940s. It was a time when fascism was still sweeping across Europe and the battle seemed far from over.

[68] Ibid, p.266.
[69] Ibid, p.270.
[70] Arendt, Hannah, "Preface", *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, O.T p.vii.

I am not sure how to interpret my father's responses to his loss and exile. He did not speak to me about his losses, of his parents, siblings, language and home. Even when I interviewed him in 1989 about his life, he made no mention of the emotional toll of these losses. I have often asked myself why this was the case. What made him decide not to speak about this? Did he think that I and others would not be interested? Or did he feel that he had no choice but to get on with his life. I don't think he responded with either "blind optimism" or "reckless despair"; instead, he retreated into silence. No one asked him, and he did not feel compelled to tell anyone. Perhaps he simply did not have the words to express his loss. That is probably why he didn't tell me who the three women in the photograph in our Port Elizabeth dining room were. Unlike Arendt, who was a public intellectual, my father could not channel his private experiences of loss and exile into a politically engaged response. It is not surprising, then, that he turned away from the world. He became a private man committed to raising a family and remaking his life at the tip of Africa. He must have resigned himself to living under the shadow of despair, even if he did not show this to those closest to him.

NINETEEN

THE WAR YEARS

When Britain and France declared war on 3 September 1939, Prime Minister Hertzog had mistakenly assumed that the United Party cabinet would support his call for neutrality. But the cabinet was divided and parliament voted for war by a narrow margin. Three days later Smuts formed a new government and South Africa entered the war.[71] By then my father must have known that his chances of rescuing his family were slim.

It is hard to imagine how my family could have held out much hope once war was declared. Mark Roseman paints a particularly dark picture of life in Berlin at the start of the war:

> By the first winter of the war, one in four depended on Jewish welfare. The city authorities were vicious. Minor traffic offences, an infringement of the blackout or curfew, crossing the street at the wrong place or shopping at the wrong time could lead to very high fines of 40 marks or more, imprisonment, concentration camp or even death. Berlin was often the first to promulgate anti-Jewish legislation later adopted for the whole Reich.[72]

It seems inconceivable that the cosmopolitan Berlin that my father's family thought they were moving to after the First World War could have come to this. Even though Cecilie still refrains from complaining to her sons in Africa, her letters increasingly mention financial hardships endured by the family and relatives. They also allude to her growing doubts that the family will ever escape.

On 2 November 1939, with the war into its third month, Cecilie writes to my father telling him about family members being arrested, becoming stateless and having to travel illegally by boat to Palestine. For the Robinski family in Berlin, it must have seemed clear that the doors had already slammed shut:

> *Hilde Urbanski has been rendered stateless because of her husband [who was born in Poland] and was directed to leave Germany within 4 weeks. She will also go to London. Just now I have received the news from aunt Mimmi [Minna Rubenstein] from Eydtkuhnen,*

[71] See Mendelsohn and Shain, 2008, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History*, p.119.
[72] Roseman 2000:123.

that Norbert has already obtained a visa to Sweden and Horst will shortly go to London. So the arrest has after all had a good side to it… This week Manfred, together with several chaverim [friends] will travel illegally to P. [Palestine] in a boat and the trip will take 3-4 weeks.[73] *The boys will not get [immigration] certificates for the present, because the parents are getting preferential treatment, and they must see to their own affairs, especially because [Manfred] has already been on Hachsharah*[74] *for 3½ years…*

As the war progresses, daily life in Berlin becomes increasingly unbearable. At the same time, the letters to the two brothers in Africa become fewer and fewer. They are replaced by 25-word telegrams sent through the International Red Cross Committee. The instructions are clear: "ENQUIRER: Message to be sent to recipient (not over 25 words; news of strictly personal character). REPLY: Message to be returned to enquirer (not over 25 words; news of strictly personal character).

Person making enquiry: D. Robinski, Wallnertheaterstr. Berlin
Your parents and siblings are well. Please send news by the same path about your state of health and that of Herbert.
30 Nov. 1939
Recipient: Artur Robins, Box 20, Ndola, North Rhodesia, East Africa.

As their dignity, humanity and livelihoods were being pared down to the bare minimum, so too was their capacity to communicate to their loved ones in exile in Africa. But what could they have written even if they were permitted more than the 25 words? How could they have conveyed what they really felt and feared - the censors were scrutinizing every word.

We learn about the distressing plight of my father's relatives during the war from a letter to Artur from his first cousin, Rudi Robinski, who had emigrated to Sweden in the early 1930s.

---

[73] I have yet to find out whether they made it to Palestine.
[74] *Hachsharah* is part of the Zionist youth movement that helped European Jews get to Palestine.

Stockholm, 31.12.1939

Dear Artur

Thank you for your letter that I received on 26.12.1939. Sadly, it was not possible for me to write to you, because I was unaware of your whereabouts. I would be interested in discovering more about your journey to Rhodesia and … about your life in your new home and your contact to relatives. Because everything is unstable, I hope that my letter will reach you soon.

I am still not able to write everything to you as I would like, in spite of the so-called democratic freedom. You have probably read in the newspapers that the USSR has "invaded democratic Finland", which brought the Scandinavian countries into the spotlight… Be that as it may, nobody knows what this means for Sweden; one can already sense an enthusiasm for war in bourgeois circles, which they are trying to spread to the middle and working class. The social-democratic government has been superseded by an interim-government and our social-democratic movement, with the exception of a few elements, is now also calling for war. Maybe now you can see that my [comrades] and I are faced with great difficulties, even if we are not yet at war. Just as I started settling in, new problems arise… What the future holds, we do not know. The new situation will also sadly mean deterioration for our lifestyle (the same with all workers and employees). We have a small modern one-bedroom apartment, which my wife with her home-grown taste has decorated. Radio and telephone are taken for granted here. You see, it could be worse. But enough of our personal [problems].

Less pleasant things are to be told about [Egon]. After he went to the Memel territory [in Poland] and then fled to Lithuania, he did send letters repeatedly in which he asked for my help. I advised him some time ago to try to immigrate to a country overseas, to which he has not replied, until I received yet another letter after the mishap. Unfortunately it was impossible for me to arrange something for him from here. The best thing I could do was organize a transit permit. Eg[on]. did not have the appropriate documentation… A few months ago I received yet another letter, this time from his wife, who told me that Eg[on] spent four weeks in a jail in Riga because of inadequate documentation… Eg[on] had a mental breakdown and his letters reflect his gloomy state. … In regards to the parents [Isidore Robinski], I did all I could to get them to Sweden. I was unable, however, to meet the economic requirements… The parents are, as I have said, still in Kaliningrad. I have sent them some butter [cash?], and will do so again, when I receive permission, for it is not simple to export certain items…

Now, dear Artur, best wishes for you from my wife and me. Happy New Year, Rudi.

It is four months into the war, and Rudi's brother Egon is stateless and without a safe place of refuge. Rudi, who had been active in the German Social Democratic party before fleeing to Sweden in the mid-1930s, starts the letter with a political analysis of the war before turning to his brother's woes. He ends with a short sentence on his failure to rescue his parents from Nazi-occupied Kalingrad (Konigsberg, East Prussia). I initially found it strange that Rudi wrote about this in such a matter-of-fact manner. But I now know that such responses were not uncommon. I suspect that Rudi, like so many others, could not find the words to convey the grief and the loss. Perhaps, like my father, he could also not afford to peer too closely into the abyss.

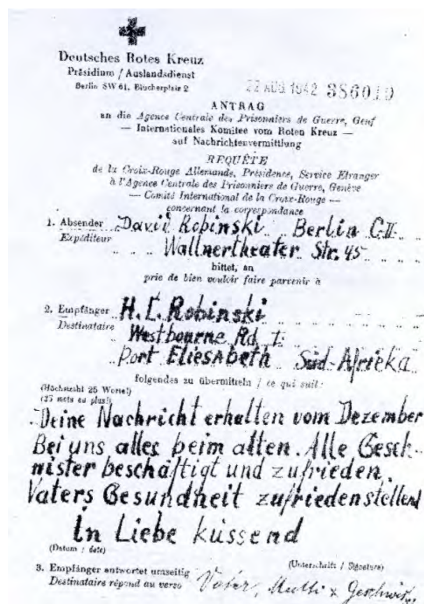
By February 1940, all communication from the family in Berlin to my father and Artur was reduced to the 25-word Red Cross telegram:

Person making enquiry: David Robinski, Wallnertheatrstreet 45, Berlin, Germany
Parents and siblings are well. Everything as usual. Heartfelt greetings
19 February 1940
Recipient: Artur Robins, 20, Ndola, North Rhodesia, Africa
Reply: **Herbert and I are well, in good health. We did not have news from you for a long time, neither from Edith, aunt Frida. Have you sent letters to Liesbeth? Received none. Heartfelt greetings your Artur.**
21 April 1940

Sender ("applicant"): David Robinski, Wallnertheaterstr. 45 II, Berlin C.2.
Recipient: Herbert L. Robinski, 1 Westbourne rd., Port Elizabeth, South Africa
Parents and siblings in good health, otherwise everything unchanged. Request news.
9 September 1940

On 22 August 1942 my father received the following telegram from his father.

We received your message from December. With us all still the same. All siblings have work and are content. Father's health is satisfactory. In love with a kiss.



Deutsches Rotes Kreuz
Präsidium / Auslandsdienst
Berlin SW 61, Blücherplatz 2

22 AUG 1942 386019

ANTRAG
an die *Agence Centrale des Prisonniers de Guerre, Genf*
— Internationales Komitee vom Roten Kreuz —
auf Nachrichtenvermittlung

REQUÊTE
de la Croix-Rouge Allemande, Présidence, Service Etranger
à l'Agence Centrale des Prisonniers de Guerre, Genève
— Comité International de la Croix-Rouge —
concernant la correspondance

1. Absender / *Expéditeur*: David Robinski Berlin C II Wallnertheater Str. 45

bittet, an
prie de bien vouloir faire parvenir à

2. Empfänger / *Destinataire*: H. L. Robinski Westbourne Rd 1 Port Eliesabeth Süd-Afrika

folgendes zu übermitteln / *ce qui suit:*
(Höchstzahl 25 Worte!)
(25 mots au plus!)

Deine Nachricht erhalten vom Dezember
Bei uns alles beim alten. Alle Geschwister beschäftigt und zufrieden.
Vaters Gesundheit zufriedenstellend
In Liebe küssend

(Datum / *date*)

(Unterschrift / *Signature*)

3. Empfänger antwortet umseitig
Destinataire répond au verso

Vater, Mutti x Geschwister

A telegram sent by David Robinski to his son in Port Elizabeth on 22 August 1942:

I have no idea how my father responded to receiving these 25-word telegrams sent between 1940 and 1942. By this stage, he must have known that there was not much he could do. These were the years that he was confined to the TB sanatorium in Nelspoort. I suspect that his health collapsed under the weight of this terrible sense of helplessness.

For Artur, life in Northern Rhodesia during the war years was equally fraught and distressing. Not only was he anxious about his family in Berlin, but his own identity as a German Jewish refugee was under intense scrutiny. On 7 August 1940, Artur wrote a letter to the Editor of *The Northern Rhodesia Advertiser* in Ndola complaining about questions being raised in the newspaper about German Jews' loyalty to Northern Rhodesia, and to the war against Germany:

> Sir – Since a few months your paper has questioned the loyalty of the German Jewish Refugees to this country. A few days ago some local groups have adopted the same outlook, and I would appreciate the courtesy of giving some space in your paper for removing some misapprehension likely to confuse and distort the facts. Your paper calls us "Germans" and "enemies", implying that we are the same brand of Germans who are out to destroy the British Empire. This is the first fallacy. We have been the first and foremost enemies of Nazi-Germany, fighting for the principles of democracy and liberalism, with the result that we became the first refugees from that country. How can a sensible man believe us to be all of a sudden enemies of a British country?... No – the refugees do not belong to the fifth column.

They do not throw [bombs] into crowded buildings and streets, they do not attack the British Empire in newspapers and meetings, they do not clamour for peace with the Nazis and Fascists. They are those who know best what Fascism means. They have been at war with Hitler since 10 years, and must necessarily be friends with everybody who fights against the same enemies…

Artur refuted these accusations at a time when both he and his brother were receiving desperate news both about the fate of family members trapped in Germany. In an email sent to me on 25 April 2013, Ute writes "My heart goes out to you. Even in translation it is not difficult to read between the lines… One can feel the menacing atmosphere which your grandmother is trying to avoid mentioning but it comes out in the letter from Frieda."

Aunt Frieda had fled Berlin for La Paz in Bolivia in 1939. She pulls no punches in her letters written from the safety of La Paz. On 12 July 1940 she writes to my father: "*It is truly sad that so far no real news concerning Auntie Dorchen's and Herta's whereabouts were received. It actually is unthinkable that in the 20th century people just get deported and no one can figure out where they have been sent to.*" She later adds, "*Unfortunately at the moment nothing can be done about the immigration request. But I can tell you one thing: When the time comes I will move heaven and earth to get Siegfried out. After all, it could be worse here, and I wish all my loved ones were here [in Bolivia].*" In another letter to my father during the war years, Aunt Frieda writes "*By now it will be difficult to find out how your relatives in Holland are doing… Most likely they will have been detained just like the others*".

On 21 April 1941, a desperate Aunt Frieda requests financial help from my father.

La Paz, 21 April 1941

Dear Herbert

Unfortunately you did not reply to my last letter, and it's been a long time since I last heard from you. I hope you and Artur are well, which I can luckily say about myself.

I think I got quite used to the climate and also have no other health problems. By now I've been here for more than a year. How fast time passes despite all trouble.

I also would like to tell you some happy news: Werner is on his way down here. I received a telegram from him from Moscow and now I am waiting desperately for him to arrive. You

can think how thrilled and excited I am! It took lots of effort, money and legwork – but thank goodness it was worth it.

Now I just want him to be here. Everything else is less important; but with some patience this time too shall pass quickly.

I received news from your parents 14 days ago. Thank God everything is fine back there – that's the most important. [That] all of them should stay healthy – that's my only wish. I wrote to them again that they'll receive some money monthly [so that] they will not be short of money and not have to worry.

Dear Herbert, it would be great favour if you could also send me some money. I opened a guest house but that turned out not be profitable. Everything is too expensive and I could not cover my expenses. So I just closed the guest house down. Work isn't easy here… and to have a job that doesn't pay off does not make any sense. I then opened a kiosk but that also does not bring enough money. I want to look for something else but first I need to sell the kiosk and keep [myself going] until then. I hope I can sell it. It's the wrong business for one person because one needs to buy everything by [oneself] which means I have to close the kiosk for hours – it's not the right thing. You need to be present to grasp the conditions.

Finally I received my things as well. It took me lots of effort and money. From Genoa they were sent to New York and then here. I had to send another $125. The benevolent society paid it in advance, as well as the delivery from Africa to here and a lot of custom fees. It felt like the paying never stopped. In the end the best things were still missing. But I lost so many things in my life – I now have to deal with this loss. I cheer myself up with the thought that other people lost even more. The most important thing is that I stay healthy; and that I can make a living for myself and for him [Werner].

I did not hear from Manfred and Egon in a long time. And your parents….

How are you and Artur and your business? I just wished the terrible war would soon come to an end so that everybody could be reunited with their loved ones…

Send my warmest regards to Artur.

Sincerely,

Auntie Frieda

My father must have felt overwhelmed by Frieda's pleas for financial help. At the time he was struggling with his business, his health and with the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to rescuing his family in Berlin.

In June 2014, I met the US historian Leo Spitzer. Leo, who was born in La Paz, was the author of *Hotel Bolivia*, a book based on his childhood memories as a European Jewish refugee in Bolivia. Having read Aunt Frieda's letters, he was astonished that she barely mentioned anything about refugee life in La Paz. Leo sent me an email with his impressions of Frieda's letters:

> Tue 2014/06/03 10:55 AM
>
> Hello Steven:
>
> I read Frieda's letters yesterday. They are obviously interesting from a family history perspective [but] they reveal a little -- not very much -- about Frieda, who seemingly alone in Bolivia, did try to survive -- opening a guest house, then (briefly) a kiosk [to sell what?], and then a guest house again. One wonders what resources she brought to acquire a guest house in the first place, given the fact that in every one of her letters she asks to be sent money.
>
> What is absolutely amazing is that she has absolutely nothing to say about Bolivia, its people, her fellow refugees, her awesome physical surroundings. Indeed, from her letters, we have no idea where in Bolivia she actually is living. Most probably in La Paz, but we have no confirmation of that fact. All this is too bad: these letters could have provided deeper insight into the refugee experience. As they are, they leave us wishing for more. Frustrating!!
>
> Abrazos,
>
> Leo

I suggested to Leo that Aunt Frieda was probably too preoccupied with her own survival to think or write about anything else. She was struggling to make a living on her own in a new country where she didn't speak the language. On 17 April 1941, my grandmother writes to Aunt Frieda to update her about the family. [75]

[75] Aunt Frieda must have forwarded this letter from Bolivia to either Artur in Northern Rhodesia or else to my father in Port Elizabeth. Cecilie suggests that Artur sent an earlier letter to Rudi Robinski in neutral Sweden, who then forwarded it to the family in Berlin. In this way, it may have been possible to avoid the International Red Cross 25-word restrictions, as well as Nazi censorship.

Berlin, 17.04.1941

Dear Friedel

I have received your letter from Hildchen and I am so glad that you – thank God – are healthy and are proving yourself well, which I never doubted. I hope that Wernerle has arrived safely in the meantime. I can imagine what joy it must be to see each other again after almost 2 years. The dear Lord does not abandon us, and I hope that He will be at our side in the time yet to come. You receive regular mail from Hildchen, which is why I do not write to you that frequently, because she tells you everything anyway. This evening the last days of Pessach will commence and up until now, we missed nothing – praise the Lord! We did not have that much Mazzen [Matzos], but we still managed quite well. On Zeider [Passover Seder], Siegfried and Edith visited us, along with the tenant and her daughter, and it was very pleasant. Our two sons were missing though. I received a letter for my birthday from Herbi through the Red Cross. He still has the old address. I received wishes from Artur via [Rudi Robinski in] Stockholm. Our daughter-in-law still works at a community project, and Siegfried has found a little work 2 months ago at Zeiss-Ikon. He likes it there and he earns well. Our Edith has found a position at a hostel, but only for 2 months. She will also find something that suits her… Hildechen has been working at the Bergmann laundry in Moabit [a district of Berlin] for 7 weeks now and she is very happy. She earns 17 to 18 Mark weekly, which is nice. She brushes the stuff which has been chemically handled.

Now I have told you everything that is noteworthy and I will end now to ensure that the letter will not be too long.

By April 1941, Hildegard had been working for almost two months as a slave labourer at a laundry in Berlin. Later, in early 1942, she was sorting out paper at a Berlin waste recycling depot. From 1941 onwards, Edith and her brother Siegfried were working as slave labourers at the Zeiss-Ikon factory in Zehlendorf (a suburb of Berlin) making optical parts for the war machine. Yet, my grandmother describes Siegfried's recent conscription into slave labour (*Zwangsarbeit*) in the most innocuous language imaginable: "*Siegfried has found a little work 2 months ago at Zeiss-Ikon. He likes it there and he earns well.*" This is not the only time she describes slave labour in such terms. In a letter to my father in early 1943, my grandmother mentions that Siegfried has a "*good and well-paid job*" at Zeiss-Ikon in Zehlendorf.

By March 1941, almost all of Berlin's Jews had been conscripted into slave labour, and Siegfried was one of tens of thousands of Jews working in factories throughout Berlin. During a visit to Berlin in February 2013, I met Margot Friedlander, a former slave labourer who had lived underground in Berlin in the early 1940s. She confirmed that Siegfried's work conditions and pay would have been abysmal. But it was well into the war by then, and my grandmother knew that censors were systematically scrutinizing all letters sent abroad; she had to be vigilant at all times.

From 1941 to 1943, Siegfried and his sister Edith worked at Zeiss-Ikon, one of the 100 factories in Berlin that supported the war effort. In late February 1943 rumours began to circulate that all Jewish slave labourers were about to be replaced by prisoners of war and deported East. Siegfried was arrested by the Gestapo on 27 February 1943, the day of Adolf Eichmann's *Grosaktion Juden* (Major Action on Jews), or what its surviving victims later came to call *Fabrikaktion* (Factory Action). That day the Gestapo and SS rounded up to 75 800 Jews working in arms factories throughout Germany. In Berlin those arrested were transported to six detention centres before being deported to Riga and Auschwitz. Siegfried was arrested, but Edith was one of about 4000 Berlin Jews who escaped that day. Only about 1500 of them survived the war. Most were caught by Jewish collaborators, the *Greifer* (catchers), who helped the Gestapo find the fugitives.

Siegfried's communist comrades may have come to the aid of his sister, providing her with access to safe houses. She would have known that Berliners had a name for those who refused to wear the yellow star and decided to hide in plain sight; they called them *die Taucher*, the divers. They were also called U-Boats. She also probably knew that only a tiny fraction of them would survive capture, hunger, illness or bombs.

In February 2013, on a freezing winter's day, the filmmaker Mark Kaplan and I visited the former Zeiss-Ikon factory that once manufactured optical instruments for the German war machine. The Zeiss factory was now, in partnership with a Swedish company, producing lenses and security locks. We filmed the factory on a Saturday afternoon. There was nobody around, except perhaps for the ghosts. The building is surrounded with barbed wire and impenetrable security fences. It is reminiscent of a military camp. I tried to imagine what Siegfried and Edith had to endure within these walls. After filming in these grey, ghostly surroundings, we escaped to Kreuzberg's Kuchen Kaiser, a well-known Berlin café in the same building on Naunynstrase that Siegfried and his wife had lived in from 1934 until 1943.

View of Kreuzberg's Oranienplatz looking onto the Kuchen Kaiser building that Siegfried and Edith Robinski lived in in the 1930s. The building also housed the bakery and café called Kuchen Kaiser (1956)

Whenever I visit Berlin I end up in Kuchen Kaiser. Sitting there sipping my coffee, I am sometimes able to conjure up a picture of Edith sitting at a table with her older brother Siegfried. In the 1930s and 1940s, Naunynstrasse would have been a busy section of the predominantly East European working-class neighbourhood of Kreuzberg. These days the neighbourhood consists of mostly working class Muslims of Turkish origin. Naunynstrasse is usually packed with shoppers, pedestrians, school children, mothers and babies, and much activity in its numerous small stores, restaurants and coffee shops. The neighbourhood was probably similar in some ways when Siegfried and his wife lived there.

If I try, I can envisage Edith walking briskly through the streets of Naunynstrasse on her way to visit her brother. Perhaps it is a warm day in the spring of 1943, the end of yet another bitterly cold Berlin winter. Yet she is in no mood to celebrate the arrival of spring. The blue sky and bright sun cannot lighten her dark thoughts. She is oblivious to the holiday atmosphere on Oranienplatz where Kreuzberg residents are soaking up the first sunny weather of the new season. In my picture she is preoccupied with trying to fit in with crowd. Perhaps she has passed a dishevelled homeless man sleeping on the bench on the square and relates to his homelessness. She too is homeless; she can no longer stay with her parents and sister in Walnertheatrestrasse in Berlin-Mitte. She is on the run, having to move from safe house to safe house. She has been underground since the day that Jewish slave labourers in Berlin, including her brother, were arrested and deported to the East.

After Siegfried's deportation on 1 March, Edith was underground, until she was arrested in July. My father told me that she did not look typically Jewish and this may have helped her to blend with the general non-Jewish population. When I look at the two photographs of Edith I find it difficult to know what is meant by her non-Jewish look. She

may have dyed her hair and found other ways to change her physical appearance. But many Jews in Germany could pass as non-Jews based on their appearance. It would seem that it was often the look of fear inscribed on their faces and their bodily comportment that gave them away. Many were caught by Jewish collaborators who were recruited by the Gestapo to identify their fellow Jews. I wonder whether Edith and other U-Boats were able to move easily through public spaces without attracting the attention of the Gestapo. Had German physical anthropologists who obsessively measured, photographed and categorised Jews succeeded in creating popular stereotypes about 'the Jewish look'? Margot Friedlander told me that when she decided to go underground she requested a Jewish doctor to do a clandestine operation in his living room in order to disguise her "Jewish nose". In 1940, the Nazis produced the viciously anti-Semitic propaganda film, "The Eternal Jews"; rather than honing on more obvious signs of Jewish identity such as the skull-cap, sidecurls or the Star of David, the film poster designers chose a large, hook-nosed, fleshy face.[76] It was because of such stereotypes that Margot Friedlander decided to redesign her own "Jewish nose".

Mark Roseman[77] writes about how Marianne Strauss, a Jewish woman who survived in hiding during the war, had hennaed her pitch black hair a fiery coppery colour. Her frizzy red hair facilitated her metamorphosis into an "Aryan-looking" looking woman. This, along with her exceptional beauty and confident and sophisticated comportment, allowed her to move quite freely throughout Germany. Clearly looks could make the difference between life and death in the dangerous underground world of the U-Boat. But looks alone were not enough. Strauss's survival as a U-Boat was also a result of the assistance she was given by members of an underground socialist organisation called the Bund. The fact that the Bundists were able and willing to provide her with access to safe houses throughout

[76] Sara Lipton, The Invention of the Jewish Nose. *New York Review of Books.* http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/gallery/2014/nov/14/invention-jewish-nose/ November 14, 2014, 12:02 p.m.

[77] Roseman, 2001:334-5

Germany was largely because her father was an extremely wealthy and influential Jewish businessman in Essen who happened to have contacts with some of the Bundists. Unfortunately David Robinski was neither wealthy nor influential, and it is doubtful that he would have had contacts with organisations willing to assist his daughter in such a risky enterprise. Again, the tragedy of triage meant that those without wealth and influence stood less chance of survival.

Edith's attempt to live as a U-Boat was the culmination of a long and despairing process of attempting to emigrate. She had considered going to the Soviet Union, China, England and South America. She had also tried to get into South Africa and Northern Rhodesia. All these efforts failed, and she was arrested on 29 July 1943, five months after going underground. After being held at the detention centre at Grosse Hamburg Strase 26, she was deported on the 4 August 1943.

When we filmed this former detention centre in February 2013, it was functioning as a predominantly Jewish school. Next to the building is a tranquil Jewish cemetery with tall trees and inviting paths to stroll. I walked through this quiet cemetery trying to imagine what it must have been like for Edith when she was detained in the building in front of me in July 1943. All I could see were her sad eyes staring back at me in a photograph taken in Berlin in 1937. In front of the cemetery, one of the oldest in Berlin, is a sculpture of anguished and despairing figures, the haunting images of inmates of the death camps. This artwork resonated with the expressions of despair in Edith eyes and inscribed in her letters to my father and Artur. I recall not wanting to speak on camera about what I was feeling at the time; words seemed incapable of capturing my inchoate feelings of dread. I walked through the cemetery silently, lost in my thoughts.

I have tried to conceive what it must have been like for Edith to have lived as a U-Boat. I can envisage Siegfried repeatedly instructing her not to convey the slightest sign of fear and anxiety in public spaces. He may have tried to persuade her that she would blend in perfectly with the crowd. Perhaps he even quipped, "With your hair dyed you'll look like the most exquisite blonde in Berlin. You will be an Aryan princess, my dear sister." Perhaps she laughed at his tomfoolery. My grandmother's letters to my father and Artur intimate that Siegfried was a playful young man with a free spirit, full of vitality. This is also evident in the line in the *Tafellied* composed for his marriage to Edith Urbanski: *'Freedom! That is his ideal'*. I would think that of all people he was probably the one who could make her laugh, even in her darkest despair. But after the 1st March 1943 he was no longer at her side.

The loss of her older brother following his deportation must have left her feeling abandoned and defeated. By then she had witnessed her parents and sister deported, and her pupils had already left, one by one, for England and Holland. With the numbers of children dwindling daily, the school will inevitably be closed down. She writes to my father and Artur expressing her relief that the children have escaped, but she sees this as the beginning of the end for her teaching career. She had filled in numerous immigration forms and sent visa photographs, documents, reference letters and curriculum vitae to the various consulates. But deep down she believed that this was all futile. The more despairing she became, the more frustrated her strong, eternally hopeful, and religious mother became. After she went underground she was entirely on her own.

In August 1941 it was announced that Jewish men and women aged between and eighteen and forty-five were prohibited from emigrating. By then, a barrage of racial decrees had already stripped away Jews' rights and citizenship. It was two years into the war when it was proclaimed that Jews over the age of six had to wear the yellow star. Before this it had been possible in such a big sprawling city as Berlin to evade restricted access to public places by looking confident and fitting in with the crowd. Before the war began, many young Jewish women chose to walk freely through Berlin's neighourhoods joking and laughing aloud, and trying to look like ordinary, carefree German girls. Some of the bolder girls even flirted with the young boys on the street. But this was before all Jews had to wear the yellow star. Even though Edith comes across as cautious and nervous, it is possible that, until the yellow star became obligatory, she too would have gone to cinemas and cafes and strolled through Berlin's streets.

I wonder if Siegfried persuaded her to prepare herself for the time when she would no longer be wearing the star. As a communist he probably knew comrades who would have been willing to help him and his sister to go underground. As a known communist, he was probably picked up by the Gestapo before he even had a chance to become a U-Boat.

Postcard of Nazi event on Oranienplatz; view from Kuchen Kaiser, no date

Having to live underground for five months must have caused Edith profound anxiety. I wonder how she survived. I can imagine that she would have tried to avoid eye contact with people whenever she was in public. But this would not have prevented her from feeling as if their eyes were boring into her very soul. Public spaces had become treacherous to navigate. No one could he be trusted, not even her former school colleagues. Anybody could be a "catcher". Because of these ever-present dangers, U-Boats were instructed to entirely forget their pasts. They had to avoid their friends, colleagues and their neighbourhoods. They had to learn to trust absolutely nobody. Edith must have felt desperately lonely, and she must have longed to make contact with someone from her past, her family, friends, or perhaps one of her work colleagues from when she was still a school teacher.

Her testimonials indicate that she had been good at her job and that was liked by both teachers and pupils. Now she was nobody, a fugitive on her own in the dangerous streets, running. If she ever went to coffee shops she would probably have tried to hide her face behind a newspaper. Walking through the streets of Berlin, her heart would have been palpitating and she would be sweating. She would have tried desperately to avoid drawing attention to herself. Perhaps she only ventured into such public places very seldom. Perhaps these places were all frequented by Nazis, Gestapo and informers. I can only speculate all this from what I have read about life as a U-Boat.

***

Kuchen Kaiser delivery driver, 1938

Kuchen Kaiser kitchen, 09 March 1932

Kuchen Kaiser kitchen, 09 March 1932

Herr Ulrich Fluss Jr, standing outside Naunynstrase 45 and Kuchen Kaiser in Kreuzberg

Herr Ulrich Fluss Jr, the son of the former owner of Kuchen Kaiser, showed me copies of photographs taken of the interior of the café from the early decades of the twentieth

century. Although the décor has changed over the years, one can still get a strong sense of what it must have been like in the 1930s and early 1940s. I am sure that Edith and Siegfried had coffee and pastries there, just as I have. As life became more dangerous for Jews, they may have felt that the tall metal grids of the heaters next to the tables served as protective barriers behind which they could hide.

Kuchen Kaiser, no date

If she ever dared to visit Kuchen Kaiser during the months that she was underground, it could have been because she thought it was one of the safer public places in Berlin. From the accounts of his son, the original owner of the café would not have informed on Jews. When I first met Herr Fluss he told me that his father had used his Falange Spanish fascist contacts to help two Jewish workers in the bakery to escape to South America. He apparently also helped a well-off Jewish business associate to escape. Herr Hans-Ulrich Fluss Senior seems to have been an enterprising man who joined the Nazi Party in order to secure contracts to provide bread and pastries to the military and various state departments. Given his entrepreneurial habits, he probably refrained from helping his Jewish tenants, Siegfried Robinski and his wife, since they did not have the money to buy their passage to safety. As Herr Fluss reminded me, Siegfried and Edith Robinski were East European immigrants from Silesia who lived in the low rental garden flat, not in the main building with the rest of the German tenants.

***

Living underground must have been terrifying for Edith. The daily uncertainty and fear must have made her feel as if her whole world was on the verge of collapsing. At the time, she was only twenty-eight years old. She had once felt confident about herself. But that was when she was teaching the children. They had loved her and she knew that she was a good teacher. But everything had been taken away from her: the children, her teaching job, her parents, her sister, and now Siegfried.

If Siegfried had indeed anticipated *Fabrikaktion*, he would have tried to prepare himself, and possibly Edith, for this scenario. He may have tutored Edith about the ground rules of surviving as a U-Boat: remove your star, destroy your deportation order, learn to live on the run and avoid contact with family and friends. Having read about the lives of U-Boats, I now know that they were instructed not to visit parts of the city where they were known. Edith would have been advised to forget that she was Jewish; attending synagogue for the festivals was over, as were any other intimate associations with fellow Jews. She would have learnt that there were even remedies for looking Jewish, including altering one's appearance using hair dye, clothing and stolen uniforms. She would have been warned to keep up appearances at all times. She would have to make sure that she was never unkempt, even if she was sleeping on trams, in parks or on houseboats. Looking dishevelled would draw unwanted attention to her. But perhaps most of all, she would have been warned to be on the constant lookout for *die Greifer* (the catcher). In particular, she would have known about the notorious Aryan-looking Jew, Stella Kubler, known as the blonde poison. She would have been inducted into a world in which people like Kubler committed these acts of betrayal to save themselves and their families from deportation. She no doubt understood that living on the run was a dog-eat-dog world where even U-Boats lied and stole just to survive.

I wonder whether Siegfried managed to retain his wit, charm and hope that the Nazi fascists would ultimately be defeated. Perhaps the optimism that he expressed in his letters to my father distracted him from the urgent task of single-mindedly pursuing emigration plans. For how long did he believe that the Soviet army would come to the rescue? Did his communist affiliations induce him to overestimate the strength of Stalin's armies? But even the ever-hopeful Siegfried must have felt paralysing fear and helplessness when he thought about the family's future. All their efforts to emigrate had come to nought. As a worker without specialist skills or artisanal certificates, no countries needed him.

It is quite possible that Edith relied on Siegfried's communist and trade union comrades to provide safe houses. U-Boats generally only stayed at a safe house for two to three weeks at a time before moving on. I wondered how she navigated her way through the dangerous streets and public places. My father had once told me that she didn't look typically Jewish. Yet, staring at her portrait, I can't see how she managed to transform herself in an Aryan-looking woman. But even looking Aryan was probably little consolation to her. She knew that whatever she looked like on the outside, she no longer felt German inside. Everything she heard on the radio, read in the newspapers and saw on the streets

reinforced this feeling. The eighty racial ordinances that had been passed since 1933 were a daily reminder that she was seen to be "unGerman" and undesirable.

Even if Edith actively sought help from Siegfried's socialist comrades, they would probably only have obliged if she had a reasonable chance of evading the Gestapo and their catchers. Too much was at stake. They may have been willing to help Edith with safe houses, but it is unlikely that they would have been prepared to assist Hildegard, whose ability to survive as a U-Boat would have been considered extremely doubtful. Her mental disability would have been considered too risky. It is also unlikely that they would have been willing to help Siegfried's wife as she was pregnant in 1943. If Siegfried was party to his sister's decision to go underground, he would have been concerned about whether she would cope with the stress of the secretive life of a U-Boat. She would have to live like a hunted animal, always on the run, hiding. Once she went underground, she must have felt as if she was living the life of the walking dead, a death row prisoner waiting for the moment to come.

The stranglehold on Jewish life in Berlin had begun well before Edith became a U-Boat. It started intensifying once the war began. In 1941, for example, there was the declaration that made it illegal for Jews to take trips to the woods around Berlin.[78] For children still remaining in Jewish schools, the only remaining place where they could play and exercise was the Jewish cemetery. By the autumn of 1941, virtually every business on the Kurfurstendamn had the sign "No entrance to Jews." By then most Berlin Jews of working age had been conscripted into forced labour where they had to endure the humiliation and exhaustion of doing unfamiliar work as well as long journeys to and from the factories. Their wages, after all the tax deductions, barely covered the most basic needs. In July and August, Berlin Jews lost extra rations granted for heavy work or long hours. Then it was announced during March 1941 that more than a thousand Jewish apartments had to be vacated within five days. The evictions had begun.

My father's family witnessed the relentless barrage of new racial ordinances and restrictions on Berlin's Jews. On 1 September 1941 it was proclaimed that Jewish men and women aged between eighteen and forty-five were prohibited from emigrating. This must have been devastating news for the Robinski family; how could Cecilie, or my father and Artur, have sustained any hope of getting Siegfried and Edith out at this stage?

[78] Roseman 2000, p.125

Mark Roseman observes that the yellow star proclamation of September 1941 had a much greater impact in Berlin than elsewhere in Germany. [79] Berlin's large size had allowed for small evasions of regulations. This now became much more difficult and dangerous. For Berlin's Jews, the yellow star signalled further ostracisation, stigmatisation and isolation. Jewish organisations could no longer offer any relief from this suffocating social death when, on 11 September 1941, the Jewish Kulturbund was banned. Then in early October came a fresh round of evictions, accompanied by the harrowing new order that those affected ought not to seek out alternative accommodation. Then came the inevitable: the deportations.

In one of the few letters from Cecilie once the war had commenced, she writes to Artur to try to allay his worries about the family's financial predicament. She also drops a new bombshell: Edith was about to get married but this has had to be postponed.

Berlin, 5.1.1942

My dear Artur

We have not heard from you for a long time and we hope that you are doing well and that you are healthy. I cannot tell you anything new from our side. Everyone on our side has found employment; even our old father has found a little work. But he has caught a cold and was thus unable to work for a couple of weeks. Thank God that he is doing better now. The skat club was at our place yesterday and Siegfried has one 1 mark. Edith II, Mrs Stein and I did some needlework and so the day passed quite comfortably. Siegfried is busy in the office and looks, thank God, quite well. Edith [Siegfried's wife] has recuperated and was able to make a profit of 108 pounds. Our Edith was about to get married and is still waiting for a document. The young man has changed his working location in the meantime and now she has to wait until he returns. Hildchen is still working for a company that sorts paper and she earns as much as Edith.

My grandmother writes that Edith's marriage has been postponed because "*the young man has changed his working location… and now she has to wait until he returns*". I interpret this to mean that he has either been deported or else he is in slave labour. Or perhaps this is the Rhodesian man who Edith was to marry as part of an escape plan that fell through when, on 23 October 1941, the emigration of Jews was forbidden by law. Again, so much is left

[79] Ibid, p.130

unsaid. Once again, Cecilie cannot reveal that the kinds of work that her children are doing is slave labour that barely covered basic needs. It is also accompanied by humiliation, exhaustion and illness. She is also unable to mention that most Jews are not used to this hard labour with its long work hours and lengthy journeys to and from work.[80] Although my grandmother still reports on the skat club evening, this time there is no mention of laughter and the cosy atmosphere. By now Cecilie must have lost all hope of getting the remaining children out. But there is so much that she cannot express. Wary of the censors, she has to stick to the bare facts.

[80] Roseman 2000 p125.

TWENTY

RIGA

The first major wave of deportations from the Third Reich to Lodz in Poland began in October 1941, followed in November by deportations to Minsk and Riga in Latvia. In January 1942 the Wannsee conference was convened in Berlin to establish the responsibility and procedure for the murder of Europe's Jews. By 1942, for the Jews who still remained in Germany, life must have been one long miserable wait for deportation under steadily deteriorating circumstances. As Mark Roseman observes, "It is a macabre fact that, even as the number of Jews in Germany dwindled, so the regulations making life unliveable became more comprehensive." [81] In the course of the year, Jews were denied eggs, white bread, bread rolls, cigarettes and numerous other goods, and Jewish rations dropped to starvation level. New decrees made it impossible for Jews to use public transport, their private telephones were confiscated, and eventually they were forbidden to use public phones. In March, they were even prevented from purchasing newspapers and magazines. Segregation was then even more strenuously enforced, and Jewish houses had to be marked with a black star. Meanwhile the expropriation of what was left of Jewish property, businesses and finance continued relentlessly. [82] The list of new racial decrees was ceaseless and bewildering. Cecilie occasionally mentions these decrees, typically in a single sentence written in innocuous language. This raft of racial decrees led inexorably to the deportations.

A letter to my father from Aunt Frieda dated 9 February 1943 conveys the anguish those who escaped must have felt once they learnt of their relatives' deportations:

> *La Paz, 9 February 1943*
>
> *Bolivia Poste Restante*
>
> *Dear Herbert*
>
> *I received your first letter after it travelled for almost nine months. I am also sending you airmail so that it arrives faster. Maybe you have some news from our loved ones. I did not hear anything from them for more than a year. Last July I inquired via the Red Cross but did not receive any reply. I also inquired via Cilly Goldschmidt [in] Santiago at the Red Cross, but they informed me that no news arrived. You probably can imagine my worries, and*

[81] Roseman, 2000:p.256.
[82] Ibid.

I have only one wish: to see our loved ones again in fine form. Dear Herbert, if you have any news, please write me immediately – but also via airmail because otherwise it will take too long. It is horrible to know that everyone remained back there. It is impossible to imagine what they already have to endure emotionally – and then the hunger and cold on top of that. If it wasn't for Hilde your parents would still have managed to get out, and Edith could have left for sure. Now there is nothing left to do. May God help all of them! Cilly also wrote that acquaintances informed her about Leo Leyde's deportation. I do not think that anybody is still there. All of them will be gone already…

Last but not least I want to wish you a happy birthday. I can only wish you one thing: remain in good shape; and may God grant that you and dear Artur will be happily reunited with your dear parents and your siblings – all in good health.

Greetings and kisses to you and dear Artur. Best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

Auntie Frieda

Aunt Frieda wishes my father happy birthday with the words, "*I can only wish you one thing: remain in good shape; and may God grant that you and dear Artur will be happily reunited with your dear parents and your siblings – all in good health.*" But by then my father's parents had already been murdered in the forests of Riga. Ten days after Aunt Frieda wrote this letter, Hildegard was deported to Auschwitz, followed by Siegfried on 1 March and Edith five months later, on 4 August. By then Aunt Frieda must have known all was lost.

For my grandparents, the deportation process had begun with the declaration of property (*Vermogenserklarung*) on the 16 October 1942. The listing of their meagre possessions – chairs, a table, and a lamp - was followed by their deportation to Riga in Latvia with the 21st transport on 19 October 1942. The mass murder of Jews at Riga is still too difficult for me to digest: naked men, women and children lined up next to mass graves and shot.

A photograph of the Einsatzgruppen (Mobile Killing Units) mass murders in 1941 in the forests of Babi Yar near Kiev in the Ukraine provides a terrifying glimpse into what probably happened to my grandparents in Riga. In the photograph, a woman tries to use her body as a shield to prevent a child from having to see the soldier with the rifle aimed at them. On the right of the photograph is a group of four or five victims, including children. They huddle with their backs to the soldier awaiting their fate. I have seen similar photographs of naked Jews standing next to open mass graves waiting to be shot. I immediately turn away from the horror just as I did when I visited Auschwitz in 1999 - with my camera stuck to my face in mortal fear of turning to stone. I try to create a safe distance between myself and the black hole, the void that sucks in life and spits out ash.

***

Photographs taken in Riga by Michael Robins of a memorial for those Jews shot in the forest

In August 2013, on route to an anthropology conference in Manchester, I stopped over in London to visit my older brother Michael, his wife Deborah and two sons, Leo and Isaac. I had hardly unpacked my bags when I launched into an intense conversation with my brother about our father and his family. I was keen to get Michael's perspective on the Robinski family history that I was busy dredging up.

Michael had left South Africa in the 1980s and settled in London, where he had established himself in the film industry. He had told me a few years earlier about his 2005 visit to Riga for a film shoot. He had visited Riga's Salaspils concentration camp as well as Rumbula forest, where tens of thousands of Jews had been shot and buried in mass graves in 1941 and 1942. At Salaspils, the Soviets had erected a memorial to those who had been murdered. As was typical of Soviet memorials, there was no specific mention of Jews; they were simply subsumed into the category of the millions of Soviet martyrs murdered in the fight against fascism. At the time of this visit, my brother had not known that our grandparents had been murdered at Riga. He recalled being told by our father that his entire family had been killed in Auschwitz. Perhaps our father did not know that his parents had been transported to Riga. In 2010, Michael revisited Riga, this time with the full knowledge of what had happened to our grandparents. He had found a book with the names of the transports to Riga, but there was no record of what happened to them upon arrival in Riga. As he wrote in an email to me 12 June 2014: "One assumes that if they survived the journey they were most probably shot in the forest about a mile away and are in the mass graves there. On arrival of the transport 60 strong men were selected as labourers, there is no record of the rest of the transport. I will send you what info I have".

My brother's visit to Riga in 2010 happened to fall on commemoration day for the 21st transport on 19 October 1942, the same transport that our grandparents were on when they were deported. At a local Jewish museum he saw the list of deportees and walked outside and cried. He later visited the forest, which is 3.5 km from the Skirotaba Railway Station. Upon returning to London, he searched the Internet and found the following account of the events surrounding the 21st transport of 19 October 1942.

> On 22 October, the next Berlin transport, which must have left the Reich capital three days earlier, reached the Skirotava Station with 959 persons. The average age of this transport was 36,7 years. There were 264 people between 16 and 40 on this train; nonetheless, only some eighty persons were selected for labor, apparently only men. They were immediately put to work, unloading the coal cars attached to their

transport. Shortly thereafter, they were sent to the Security Police athletic field in Mezaparks (Kaiserwald), where they relieved the Jews barracked there and continued with the levelling work. Individual survivors were taken to the barracking at the Security Police auto workshop on Petersalas St. (Peterholmsche St.). The final transport to come to Riga left on 26 October 1942, reaching Riga three days later. All 798 people, including the potential workers aged 16-40, were shot upon arrival.[83]

Although my brother and I now know the threadbare facts of what happened to David and Cecilie Robinski in Riga in October 1942, we still cannot begin to comprehend what they experienced. Neither can we know how my father responded to the International Red Cross notice he received after the war.

Top, a memorial in Riga for those Jews shot in the forest. Bottom left, railway station that our grandparents must have arrived at from Berlin; bottom right, a memorial to the mass murders in the Riga forest (Michael Robins)

[83] Andrej Angrick, Peter Klei, *The "Final Solution" in Riga: Exploitation and Annihilation, 1941-1944*

TWENTY-ONE

FINDING MY FATHER

From left to right, Artur, Steven, Herbert and Michael Robins. The photograph was taken at Michael and Deborah Robins' wedding in Cape Town in 1983

Eugen Robinski's grandson Harold Levy recalled playing bridge at his mother's home in Port Elizabeth during the war years with a small group of Jewish refugees who spoke broken English with thick German accents. The bridge players included my father and Ewald Nagel, the husband of Lily, one of Eugen's four daughters. The bridge players would anxiously listen to radio news broadcasts on the war. Harold recollected that my father would become extremely agitated whenever he heard Hitler's speeches or news of German military advances in Europe. Whereas Ewald Nagel was profoundly pessimistic, firmly believing in the military superiority of the Germans, my father still hoped that the Allies would win. I recently watched a documentary on the Second World War and tried to imagine what my father must have been going through as the seemingly invincible German army swept across Europe towards Stalingrad. No wonder he was in a state of perpetual panic. It is also hardly surprising that his health took a turn for the worse in 1940, and had to be admitted to a TB sanatorium in the Nelspoort in the Karoo.

Harold, a bright and precocious young boy, was deeply influenced by his exposure to this small group of worldly European refugees. He learnt about what was happening in the war at a time when most white boys his age were obsessed with little else other than rugby and cricket. This exposure led to his early conversion to Zionism, but he soon became disaffected with the violent methods militant Zionists used in their struggle for a Jewish state. He was more inclined towards rational argument, which suited the temperament of a boy who would later become an attorney and a Supreme Court judge. Harold also

remembered how his mother Hetty tirelessly tried to assist my father to get Edith out of Germany. He also vividly recalled the day my father told Hetty that he had received news that Edith had been deported to Auschwitz. Although my father must have been devastated by this news, he had to get on with his life. He could not afford to dwell too long in this space on inconsolable grief.

On 29 June 1943, my father received an unusual letter from Rudi Robinski, his cousin in Stockholm.

Stockholm, 29.6.43
Bergsgatan 9 Stockholm

Dear Herbert!
You will perhaps be surprised to receive this letter from me. First of all I can inform you, that my sister Edith and my brother-in-law have also been deported a while ago, so that I do not any longer correspond with Berlin. My parents have, as you perhaps already know, suffered the same fate. Should I, against all expectations, hear something about your relatives, I will inform you immediately.
The actual reason for this letter is of a business nature. I wished to request you to investigate, whether there are pelt firms (en gros or detail) over there who would wish to have a connection with Stockholm.
Either this could pertain to African furs sent here, or even the export of Swedish furs (red-, silver- blue and platinum fox and mink). Should you be interested in this yourself or should you wish to work together with a firm, even better.
As these are plans for the future, i.e. post-war plans, we could arrange all the details here later. Thanking you in anticipation for all possible efforts I remain
Your cousin Rudi
P.S. I am a qualified furrier.

Rudi briefly mentions the deportation of his family using strikingly detached language before moving on to discuss a business proposition. This type of dispassionate response to family tragedies was probably not that unusual amongst refugee survivors such as Rudi and my father. They had no choice but to try and put the past behind them. They had to restart their lives in their new countries. Even if they could have found words to describe what they felt, they probably would have still have chosen to remain silent. They

could not afford to face the overbearing burden of guilt and loss they carried within themselves.

In another letter from Stockholm sent a year later, on 25 May 1944, Rudi cuts to the chase: "*As I have to be brief, I will immediately deal with business matters*". There is no mention at all in the letter about the war, or what happened to his parents; it is all about exploring business opportunities: exporting furs from South West Africa, and importing raw silver fox hides into South Africa. Nothing came of any of these business propositions.

Stockholm, 29/6 43
Borgogatan 9.
Stockholm

Lieber Herbert!

Du wirst vielleicht verwundert sein, von mir diese Zeilen zu erhalten. Zunächst kann ich Dir mitteilen, daß meine Schwester Edith und mein Schwager vor einiger Zeit gleichfalls deportiert sind, so daß ich nunmehr nicht länger mit Berlin korrespondiere. Meine Eltern haben, wie Du vielleicht schon weißt, dasselbe Schicksal erlitten. Sollte ich wieder Erwarten von Deinen Verwandten etwas hören, werde ich es umgehend mitteilen.

Der eigentliche Zweck dieser meiner Zeilen ist geschäftlicher Natur. Ich wollte Dich bitten zu untersuchen, ob es dort Pelzfirmen (engros oder détail) gibt, die eine Verbindung mit Stockholm wünschen. Entweder kann das Import von afrikanischen Fellen hierher gelten, oder auch Export von schwedischen Fellen (Rot-, Silber-, Blau-, und Platinafuchs und Nerz). Wenn Du selbst daran interessiert bist oder mit einer Firma zusammen arbeiten willst, desto besser. Da dies Zukunftspläne sind, d.h. Nachkriegspläne, können wir alles Nähere später-

[illegible]. Dir im Voraus für eventuelle Bemühungen dankend, verbleibe ich Dein Rudi.

P.S. Bin gelernter Kürschner.

Above, letter sent by Rudi Robinski to my father from Stockholm in 1943. In a single sentence, Rudi mentions that his parents and his sister and brother-in-law have all been deported. He then asks my father whether he is interested in joining him in establishing a business exporting Swedish fox pelts.

Ute believed her own responses to the devastating letters she translated helped her to grasp why survivors like Rudi did not speak about their family losses. She told me that whenever she read a particularly distressing letter, she would go into denial and try to forget its content. Her awareness of her own strategies of denial helped her to understand the omissions and silences in the letters. This was especially evident in some of the war-time letters from Aunt Frieda in Bolivia and Rudi Robinski in Sweden:

> There is also something that happens when I translate. I'm sometimes in denial myself. So, this letter from Bolivia shocked me, and then I forgot about it. This is what happens in the process of translation. Now, Aunt Frieda, as far as I know from her letters to your father, forgot about the family in Berlin. In a way, she also suppressed it, she was in denial… Frieda had a tough time in Bolivia, and she couldn't be wistful about anything or anybody. She had to survive, she lost everything, and had to rebuild again, and Herbie helped her. In the letters that I saw she didn't so much worry anymore about getting anybody out [of Germany]. She just was sorry that it happened. But they got on with their lives now, the same with Rudi in Stockholm. Rudi writes to Herbie, "All my parents have been deported. I will not write about them anymore. I have no correspondence with Berlin anymore. They are gone"…And then he writes about business, "Have you got any prospects for furs or trading with furs?" So it was a case of cutting it off. Those who survived, they had to cut it off and carry on living.

There were also those occasions when the letter writers broke the silence and expressed their anger, despair and pain. On 12 July 1940 Aunt Frieda, writes to my father from the safety of La Paz in Bolivia: "*It actually is unthinkable that in the 20th century people just get deported and no one can figure out where they have been sent to.*" Similarly, despite Cecilia's efforts not to succumb to despondency, she laments, *"It is a hard lot for us Jews, all scattered far apart and also with an uncertain future. But we must have courage and hope for a good future".* "That lament of your grandmother is the only one I translated, it's the only time", Ute said to me during our conversation at her flat. But she must have forgotten about the letter to my father dated 30 September 1938, when Cecilie lamented, *"Hopefully the Almighty will have mercy on us in the coming year and give us a little joy and contentment; so that it may be granted to the Jews to lead a worthy life as human beings."*

So much is left unsaid in my grandmother's tragic despatches to her sons in Africa. The same can be said about the decades of silence in my father's house.

***

Speaking to my brother in London in 2013 made me question my assumptions about my father's response to his loss. Reading the letters from Berlin had led me to conclude that he must have been a broken man, even though he tried his utmost to conceal this from his sons. I had come to the conclusion that behind his conviviality and charm, there must have been a man with a large gaping hole in his soul. After speaking to Ute about the letters, I was convinced that he kept his pain securely locked away in a black hole of silence. Michael saw things differently. He believed that both my father and Artur simply got on with their lives, because this was what his generation did whenever they were confronted with personal tragedy and loss. They were probably unfamiliar with trauma counselling or our contemporary 'talk cure' cultures of psychotherapy. Neither was there the classified psychiatric condition called post-traumatic stress disorder. One had to find one's own way of coping after the catastrophe.

Michael was convinced that our father's generation had come to accept the brutal realities of war. During the First World War, millions of young men had died in Europe's barbaric killing fields. During this war, the Robinski family had suffered losses when my father's little sister Erika died of hunger and malnutrition because of food shortages. My grandfather also came back from the war shocked and disillusioned by its devastating destruction. Life expectancy then was low, and death was everywhere. Michael believed that our father's generation accepted personal and family tragedies more easily than we do. Perhaps they were more fatalistic. Even so, I suspected that my father hid away the inconsolable sorrow and loss in a black box buried in his unconscious. Now, as a second-generation survivor, I was cautiously prising open its lid.

When I met Mookie Tabakin - the seventy-year-old daughter of my father's close friends Rudi and Ruth Cohn – she provided another angle on my father. Rudi and my father

became close friends in 1936, the year that these two German Jewish refugees arrived in Port Elizabeth. Ruth, who joined Rudi two years later, came from a very wealthy Jewish family in Alternburg. Rudi and Ruth had met in Germany in 1936, when her father, who was desperate to get his daughter out of Germany, agreed that she should marry Rudi as he was about to leave for Port Elizabeth. The two married a few days after Ruth's arrival in Port Elizabeth in 1938. Rudi and Ruth got on so well with my father that they invited him to stay with them. Rudi and my father became inseparable. They mostly socialised with South African-born Jews rather than German Jews, whom they felt were too uptight and took themselves too seriously. Boetie Berger was the leader of this band of Jewish *jollers* who relished their music, drink, card games and nightclub revelling. I have a colour photograph taken at a party, probably in the 1980s, with my parents dressed in traditional Asian attire. In this double-exposure image, Boetie and his wife Lily are smiling spookily at the bottom of the photograph.

My father and mother hover above the spectral double exposure image of Boetie and Lily Berger. The photograph was probably taken at a fancy dress party in PE in the late 1970s or early 1980s.

Rudi, Ruth and my father lived together in a large house in Allen Street on the Old Cape Road. There were two other German Jewish refugee tenants, Henner Levy and a serious scholarly man, Werner Lowenstein. Henner Levy was an ambitious businessman who did not approve of the party-loving and nightclubbing pair of Rudi and my father. All the men in the house were involved in the rag trade, and they helped my father establish himself selling women's underwear and, later, as a traveling salesman. Rudi established an upmarket retail shop, Continental Fashions, and invited my father to join him there. This gave my father a foot into the *smutter* (clothing) trade in Port Elizabeth.

I am not sure who this woman is, or where and when the photograph was taken;
I suspect it was taken in Port Elizabeth before my father married in 1955.

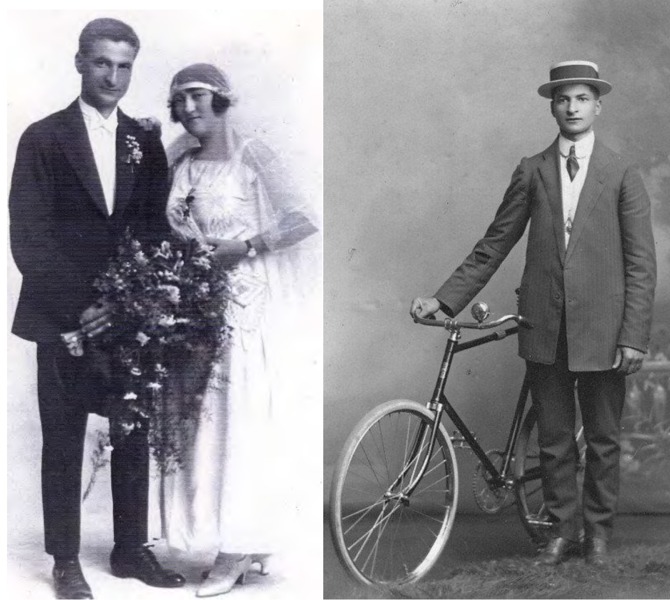
My mother on the beach in Port Elizabeth, January 1947

By the early 1950s, my father had become a relatively successful businessman. In 1955, he married Ruth Naomi Rom. Ruth, who was born in Port Elizabeth in 1929, was a pretty young woman. She was twenty-six years old at the time, twenty years younger than my father. She was raised in an orthodox Jewish family. Her father, Harry Rom, had been born Lithuania and arrived in South Africa in the early 1900s. Ruth and her siblings grew up in a mixed white and coloured working-class part of South End in Port Elizabeth. In the

early 1960s, this neighbourhood witnessed the forced removal of the coloured population under the notorious Group Areas Act. My grandfather had a small trading store, and my mother and her siblings would have to walk house to house to collect the debt owed to their father's shop. My mother made sure she escaped her childhood in this working-class part of town and, after marrying my father, moved out of South End and up the social ladder in Port Elizabeth's small Jewish community.

From left to right, Ralph, Ruth and Bill Rom.

My mother and her three siblings, Ralph, Bessie, Doreen and Bill, were raised in a tightly regimented, religious household. My grandfather treated Ruth as his favourite, the jewel in the crown. She was his beautiful princess. The rest of the siblings did not have it so easy. Ruth's younger brother, Ralph, was mentally challenged, and spent the latter part of his life in sad circumstances at Valkenberg Mental Asylum. My mother had always insisted that Ralph's 'problem' was the result of a car accident; my brother and I suspected it was probably a hereditary mental health condition. Doreen married a very large and loud man, Ivan Katz, who had once been a professional wrestler. The Katzes lived in a lower-middle class neighbourhood in Muizenberg in the southern suburbs of Cape Town. We rarely saw them. Even if they had lived in Port Elizabeth, it is doubtful we would have seen much of them. My mother seemed embarrassed by their social status. She generally confined her relationships to successful upper-middle-class Jews; Doreen's family certainly didn't qualify. My mother's brother, Bill, was the creative one in the Rom family. He ended up being a successful and talented architect, but died tragically from cancer at a young age. Bessie married Hillel Turok, a successful architect who came to South Africa from Latvia as a child. They lived happily with their three children in the affluent suburb of Camps Bay.



Left, my maternal grandparents, Harry and Sarah Rom; right, Harry Rom as a young man with a bicycle

My mother in the middle with her parents, Sarah and Harry Rom

Rachel Leah Rom nee Chezark, Harry Rom's mother

My grandfather, Harry Rom, was an ultra-orthodox Jew who was deeply suspicious and disapproving of this secular, assimilated German Jewish refugee who wanted to marry his daughter. My father was twenty-two years older than her and had, in Harry's eyes, the dubious reputation of being a handsome and dapper man about town. Whenever we visited my grandparents at their flat in Humewood, my father would stay in the car doing his crossword puzzle and reading the newspaper. He claimed that he found the two flights of stairs hard-going. Yet, he coped quite well with the long, daily walks with his dogs. A disapproving father-in-law was a good enough reason to stay in the car. Neither can I recall Harry Rom ever visiting our house. Either he totally disapproved of my father or he refused to enter our non-kosher home, or maybe it was a combination of both. My cousin Paul once told me that upon hearing that Apollo 11 had landed on the moon, an enraged Harry Rom made up his mind to go speak to the Rabbi about this arrogant intrusion of man into God's sacred territory above. My father's response to the moon landing and God was very different. I remember him being in great awe of science's great achievement in landing on the moon. When it came to Harry's Great God of the Universe, I can recall my father asking how it was possible for such a God to sit idly and watch six million perish. No wonder my father and Harry could not be in the same room.

I was born in Port Elizabeth in 1959, two years after my older brother. When my father had proposed to my mother, he told her that she would have to raise the children on her own. He felt that being forty-eight years of age meant that he was already too old to be actively involved in the upbringing of his children. Whenever my school friends saw us together, they assumed he was my grandfather. By the time I was in my teens, he had already retired to his daily routines of crossword puzzles, detective fiction and walking the dog. It was left to my mother to manage the household and micro-manage me, and the maid.

We lived in a large and comfortable house in the solidly middle-class suburb of Mill Park. My parents could afford to send my brother and I to good schools and, later, to university. So, in many respects, things worked out quite well for us in Port Elizabeth. In his later years, my father seemed reasonably content with his life. He had a long and relatively healthy life, and died peacefully in a hospital bed on 26 May 1990 at the age of eighty-three.

My father and mother, the photograph was probably taken in Port Elizabeth, c. mid-1950s.

I am comforted by Mookie's remembrances of my father's revelry as an eligible bachelor in Port Elizabeth. I savoured Mookie's accounts of Rudi and my father's adventures at the Sky Roof nightclub at the Marine Hotel in Summerstrand. They enjoyed their whisky, chain-smoked, and played cards into the early hours of the morning. My charming, elegant and good-looking father was routinely seen at nightclubs in the company of attractive young women. These moments of leisure must have served as respite from the grief and loss.

I have often tried to imagine what it was like for Artur and my father to have left their family behind. Did they speak to each other about this? Perhaps they kept their feelings to themselves, not wishing to burden each other or their families. Maybe they feared that opening up the black box of repressed memories might precipitate an emotional and psychological collapse from the sheer weight of loss and grief. They couldn't afford to be derailed; they had to get on with their lives. They had to rebuild their lives from scratch in new and alien countries.

I found a photograph of the two brothers and their wives, possibly taken at a restaurant in Port Elizabeth in the 1970s. My mother and Aunt Elsa had what could be generously characterised as a frosty relationship. I imagine that they did not get on very well that night either. The photograph suggests to me that the brothers felt satisfied with their lot; by then both of them had established families and had reasonably successful businesses. But I still wonder how they learnt to live in the wake of the catastrophe.

On the left is my mother and next to her is my father; on the far right is Elsa with Artur sitting next to her. The photograph was probably taken in Port Elizabeth in the 1970s

TWENTY-TWO

FACING THE REMNANTS OF AUSCHWITZ

In 1999, when I visited Auschwitz with my wife Lauren, I had already known for three years that Edith, Hildegard and Siegfried had been deported there in 1943. But there was a vast chasm between having this information and arriving at the place of destruction. After living for so many years in the shadows and silences of the catastrophe, I had finally come face-to-face with the material remains of the crime.

While I was writing this book, I decided to re-read Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Spiegelman's graphic novel is a harrowing account of his father's experiences during the war, including the period he was in Auschwitz. *Maus* reveals Spiegelman's troubled relationship with his father, Vladek. As the story unfolds, one begins to understand the origins of Vladek's quirky and, at times, pathological behaviour. He is obsessed with hoarding things, and not spending money. Valdek's experiences of Auschwitz live on in his eccentric habits and nightmares. Reading *Maus* triggered my own memories of my father. In his later years, my father would pilfer from departmental stores. Hoarding and thriftiness are probably the standard symptoms of those who have lived through wars, famines and grinding poverty. Perhaps my father's petty pilfering was a reflection of an existential pain that could not find expression in any other way.

I have wondered what visiting Auschwitz reveals and what it conceals. The March of the Living is an international education programme that brings participants from all over the world to Poland on Yom Ha'Shoah, Holocaust Memory Day (16 April). They then march from Auschwitz 1 to Auschwitz-Birkenau. On 22 April, the youth who have done the march are taken to Israel to participate in Yom Ha'Zikaron, Israel's Memorial Day for the Fallen Soldiers. A day later they celebrate Israel's Independence Day called Yom Ha'Atzmaut. These educational tours are tightly tethered to a redemptive Zionist script about the making of the Jewish state. But even without this instrumental ideological framing, it is unclear to me what one actually learns when walking through the ruins of this death camp. When I visited Auschwitz in 1999 with my video camera tightly strapped to my forehead, I was able to avoid having to directly face the horror of the place. This visit taught me one thing - whenever possible, I try to look away from the abyss, for fear of turning into stone.

I would not be the first to observe that language, understanding and conventional historiographic modes of representation break down at the gates of Auschwitz. All we can hope for are glimpses of what happened through the traces and fragments that remain. There is a vast scholarly literature on the limits of representing and comprehending the death camps. Despite these limits of representation, the mere mention of the word Auschwitz these days is enough to elicit feelings, utterances and statements of shock, outrage, grief, melancholy, despair, blame, guilt, moral fatigue, ethical indifference and even outright denial. Millions of people all over the world have encountered various versions of the history of the Shoah through affectively charged television documentaries, educational programmes, feature films, photographs, books, theatre, museums, memorials, art installations and various other media. Given this proliferation of representations and responses, does it make any sense to claim that Auschwitz is shrouded in silence? Or, perhaps more to the point, what is there left to say in the wake of this cacophony of voices, archives, books, films and museum exhibitions?

Historians, sociologists and philosophers insist that despite all this Holocaust discourse, a fundamental question remains unanswered: how could Auschwitz have happened in the heart of civilised Europe? There are of course numerous perspectives and schools of thought clamouring to respond to this question. One of these responses can be found in popular historical books, biographies, feature films and television documentaries that pin everything on the prime evil personalities of the Third Reich: Hitler, Himmler, Heydrich, Eichmann, Mengele and Goebels. This cast of characters, and there are others as

well, are usually depicted as the insane and evil Nazi masterminds of genocide. Such accounts tend to ignore the long historical build up to this cataclysmic event. Anti-Semitism, ethnic nationalism and fascism didn't appear from nowhere. These were the result of long, slow histories of racial nationalism and prejudice that were building up in the heart of Europe.

Then there are those who believe that Nazi terror and the Holocaust mirrored an inherent German propensity to irrational and uncontrolled hatred of Jews which, so the argument goes, can be traced back many generations. The American Jewish scholar Daniel Goldhagen is one of those who assert that ordinary Germans shared an almost innate predisposition towards Anti-Semitism, as if this was somehow encoded in their DNA. By contrast, scholars such as the Polish-born sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argue that the mass exterminations of the Holocaust were the outcome of the calculated exercise of bureaucratic and technical rationality, and that this possibility lies within the cold and potentially lethal logic of modernity itself.

Following a similar line of argument, the German Jewish refugee and political philosopher Hannah Arendt proposed that the death camps were made possible by thoughtless bureaucrats such as Eichmann. It was these officials who systematically produced the train timetables that made the genocide possible. In her 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Arendt conveys the terrifyingly mundane character of this modern bureaucratic machinery. Arendt also believed that Nazism and Soviet totalitarianism were the endgames of colonial rule and its technologies of extermination. In other words, Empire and colonial rule were the laboratory that produced a brand of barbarism whose murderous methods boomeranged back into the heart of Europe.

Another perspective on the Shoah insists that it is futile, and perhaps even perverse, to try and find explanations for this incomprehensible human tragedy. The French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard once wrote that Auschwitz had become the paradigm of historical catastrophes that could not be represented by our usual forms of language and modes of representation. For Lyotard, any explanation of the Holocaust will always be inadequate to the task at hand. A version of this argument is that nobody can truly understand or testify to what happened in the gas chambers and crematoria; to do so would require one being what Primo Levi referred to as one of "the saved". Such a survivor would be disqualified from being a witness to what actually happened in the abyss of Auschwitz by virtue of having survived. This argument also implies that language, films, books, and any

other forms of modern discourse are ultimately rendered mute by the unspeakable nature of this catastrophic event. Any attempts to seek human motives, explanation and justifications for what happened therefore descends into speculation, if not pure idiocy. Claude Lanzmann, the acclaimed French director of the epic documentary film *Shoah*, insists that any attempt to interpret or explain the reason for the Holocaust becomes sheer obscenity.

The pioneering historian of the Holocaust, Saul Friedlander, takes a less extreme and judgemental position, arguing that we are confronted with the insoluble dilemma of having to choose between the inadequacy of traditional ways of historical representation and yet compelled to provide as reliable a narration as possible. If historians are unable to provide convincing, reliable accounts of this event, Friedlander writes, Holocaust denialists will step into this breach.

My father was never able to comprehend how it was possible for this descent into barbarism to have taken place in the heartland of "civilised Europe". My grandfather probably thought that his family were forever leaving behind backward Polish anti-Semitism in search of hospitality and tolerance in modern, cosmopolitan Berlin. Letters sent to my father from friends and relatives after the war suggest that what happened to him and his family had left him shattered. The South African researcher on Lithuanian Jewry, Claudia Braude, found Jewish Board of Deputies documents and letters from 1944 and 1945 that reveal that South African Jews were shattered when they received the Red Cross telegrams informing them what happened to their relatives. Suicides and depression were commonplace. Most South African Jews had their roots in Lithuania, where 90 per cent of Jews had perished during the war. South African Jews also feared for their own future in a country where so many Afrikaner nationalists had supported Germany's wartime campaigns. This changed in 1948, when Prime Minister Malan began his friendly overtures to South African Jews. This was followed by Malan's 1953 visit to Israel's Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, followed by the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. I wonder what my father made of all of this. I suspect that he was too preoccupied with trying to survive to dwell too much on these twists and turns in the relationships between Afrikaner nationalists and South African Zionists.

In 1957, a Mr T. Schraml, a former work colleague from Erfurt, wrote to my father: "*I want to ask you not to hate the Germans. You get the good and the bad, and he who hates is not a good person. And I know you as a good person who has been, however, a little unstable*". I am not sure what Mr. Schraml means by the word "unstable". But who would not have been deeply disturbed by what had happened to my father. Yet, he was also being called upon to forgive,

forget and reconcile with Germans - a mere dozen years after the liberation of the camps. Meanwhile, Aunt Frieda wrote to him to try to reassure him not to worry that he was suddenly losing all his hair. In another letter, a relative advises him that it would be good for his health if he were to start a family of his own; this would distract him from thinking about the past.

My father did not read scholarly and philosophical debates on the Shoah. Unlike me, he did not have the luxury of going to university. He had to leave school at the age of thirteen because of his family's dire financial circumstances. Although he was an intelligent and thoughtful man, he was not drawn to highbrow literature. We never spoke about the Shoah, but I can recall the two of us going to see the film version of Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum.* I cannot remember whether we spoke much about the film afterwards. I missed out on so many opportunities to speak to him. This book is my attempt to tell him what I have learnt about what happened.

TWENTY-THREE

FINDING FISCHER'S FOOTPRINT, AGAIN

Two decades after first encountering Eugen Fischer's name at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, I stumbled across his footprint once more. This time it was much closer to home, at my place of work at Stellenbosch University. The story of Fischer's scientific career began with his 1908 Rehoboth Baster study and culminated in his directorship of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics in Berlin from 1929 to 1942. After the Second World War, Fischer's type of scientific inquiry became thoroughly discredited internationally. Yet, apart from Mengele, virtually all the German scientists associated with Fischer's Institute were left unscathed by the de-Nazification processes. They benefited from the post-war consensus that concluded that it was necessary to rebuild Germans' trust in science. Many of Fischer's former colleagues at the Institute in Berlin continued to be cited in international academic journals well into the 1960s. Others reinvented themselves as genetic scientists. Responding to the catastrophic direction eugenics took in Nazi Germany, UNESCO produced statements after the war insisting that race ought to be understood as a social construct rather than a biologically determined essence. One of the influential authors of these post-war treatises on race was the Jewish anthropologist and founding figure of French structuralism, Claude Levi-Strauss.

As a social anthropologist who studied at the University of Cape Town in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I was trained to be deeply suspicious of anything that smacked of scientific racism or biological determinism. As students we were acutely aware of how scientific ideas were used and abused to prop up apartheid. Then, in 1996, during my visit to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, I learnt about Eugen Fischer's contribution to Nazi racial science. At the time I jotted down in my diary: "An accomplice no doubt about it. Fischer's findings led to policy decisions that led to the killing of Jews and Gypsies". Little did I realise then that I would stumble upon Fischer's footprint again while searching for traces of my ancestors in the Karoo – and once again in my own department at the university where I taught.

Fischer's story provides sobering lessons for science, and for my own discipline of anthropology. He was an ambitious man who believed that scientific expertise ought to determine state policies. He had struggled to influence policy during the Weimar Republic

period. The obstacles to realising his scientific ambitions lay with the accountability structures of liberal democracy. To influence policy one had to lobby and pressure parliamentarians. This was a slow and laborious process. The rise to power of the Nazis presented Fischer with unprecedented opportunities to short-circuit all of this. In no time he had a direct line to the most powerful Nazis. The German historian of science during the Third Reich, Hans-Walter Schmuhl, describes this moment as Fischer's Faustian Pact. As Director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin, Fischer offered to provide the Nazis with scientific expertise to guide their eugenics policies. In return, he attained unlimited access to the top echelons of the Nazi Party. Along with this came access to state resources for research. Medical scientists and doctors became virtual gods during the Third Reich. Their expertise was seen to hold the key to the modern eugenicist state so desired by the Nazis. Throughout his illustrious career, Fischer drew on his Rehoboth Baster research to boost his status as the leading scientist on racially mixed populations (*Mischlinge*). In a perverse twist of fate, the same ideas about racial mixing and "bad blood" derived from Fischer's Rehoboth study later came to haunt Jews in Nazi Europe. Both marginalized and liminal groups – the Basters and the Jews – became victims of scientific ideas that were incubated in the colonies of southern Africa.

My discipline of anthropology could be held complicit in the atrocities perpetrated in the name of eugenics. But there were also many anthropologists who dismissed eugenics as a pseudo-science. Frantz Boas vigorously opposed eugenics from his position as Chair of the Department of Cultural Anthropology at Columbia University, and ultimately won the battle by successfully refuting the findings of Madison Grant, Goddard and Davenport. By the late 1920s, support for eugenics was in any case starting to show some signs of steady decline in the US. Part of the reason for this was the 1924 immigration restriction legislation. Having won this major legislative victory, the influence and rationale for the eugenics movement began to wane. Meanwhile, the fortunes of eugenicists in Germany were on the rise. For Nazi Germany, the problem was not immigration quotas, but rather what to do with its internal 'inferior' populations – Jews, Roma, Sinti, the disabled, communists and homosexuals.

Professor Hans-Walter Schmuhl writes that the complicity of eugenics research in Nazism unfolded in gradual stages. It was a slow and cumulative process of transgression. Fischer's researchers first began in mental asylums and prisons where they did research on inmates who were compelled to participate without granting consent. By the time the war began, research was taking place in prisoner-of-war camps. Mengele's Auschwitz medical

research programme, which became the largest laboratory for research on twins in the world, was the culmination of this slide into scientific barbarism. In the name of scientifically-based social improvement, an international eugenics movement had unleashed the scientific monstrosity that underwrote Nazi ideology and policy.

Eugenics was not simply a German obsession. It was embraced by scientists in many countries and across the political spectrum. During the 1920s and early 1930s, the Rockefeller and Harriman Foundations and Carnegie Institute backed German eugenics to the hilt. Meanwhile, influential US eugenicists such as Davenport collaborated in Fischer's research programmes. These ties of mutual support and collaboration were buttressed by the major American and international institutions, including the Eugenics Research Association, the Galton Society, The International Federation of Eugenics Organizations, the Third International Congress of Eugenics and the *Eugenical News*, which was published at the Carnegie Institute offices in Cold Spring Harbour. Even after Hitler came to power in 1933, the *Eugenical News* celebrated eugenic developments in Nazi Germany.[84] The premier US eugenics researchers at Cold Spring Harbour rushed to get a complete copy of the 1933 Nazi sterilization law from the German consul. It was translated and published in *Eugenical News* with glowing accompanying commentary:

> Germany is the first of the world's major nations to enact a modern eugenical sterilization law for the nation as a unit… The law recently promulgated by the Nazi Government marks several substantial advances. Doubtless the legislative and court history of the experimental sterilization laws in 27 states of the American union provided the experience, which Germany used in writing her new national sterilization statute. To one versed in the history of eugenical sterilization in America, the text of the German statute reads almost like the 'American model sterilization law'… In the meantime it is announced that the Reich will secure data on prospective sterilization cases, that it will, in fact, in accordance with 'the American model sterilization law,' work out a census of its socially inadequate human stocks.[85]

---

[84] Edwin Black, 2003. *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race.* Washington D.C. Dialog Press, p.300. Also see Jonathan Peter Spiro's 2009 *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant.* Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont Press.

[85] Ibid.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, there was an international consensus that eugenics was the key to improving the health and welfare of national populations. By the early 1930s, the German eugenics programme was widely recognised as the science of the future. At a time when 16,000 sterilizations were taking place each year in the US, Hitler was promising to go much further. Even though the influence of eugenicists on policy in the US was on the decline, they were breathless in anticipation of the possibilities presented by the Nazis' new mass sterilization programme. As Edwin Black observes, "the war against the weak" was about to graduate from America's eugenics slogans, IBM index cards, and sterilization surgical blades to Nazi racial decrees, Jewish ghettoes and death camps. [86] This shift from IBM index cards to Zyklon B was not inevitable; it required a series of contingent events and a cast of characters that included ambitious scientists like Fischer who believed that they knew exactly how to implement programmes of human improvement.

In February 2013, during a visit to the Eugen Fischer Collection at the Free University's Max Planck Society Archives in Berlin's suburb of Dahlem, I was shown the original prints of Fischer's anthropometric photographs of Basters. The photographs, which were taken shortly after the Herero genocide, consisted of dozens of sombre, unsmiling Rehoboth Basters. Some say that the devoutly Christian Rehobothers had steadfastly refused Fischer's requests to photograph and measure them naked. Others claim that he never asked them strip. Staring at their stern expressions, I wondered whether they saw through Fischer's cold, scientific practices of classification and anticipated where it was all could go. Maybe Fischer simply asked them not to smile for the camera.

Eugenics instruments at the tip of Africa: Left: The eye colour table of Rudolf Martin and the hair colour table of Eugen Fischer; Right, the skull found in the box - all these objects were found at the Stellenbosch University's Sasol Museum in 2013

[86] Black, 2009:318).

A couple of days after I returned from Berlin, my research assistant, Handri Walters, told me that the curator of the Stellenbosch University Museum had given her a cardboard box containing a skull, an eye colour scale, and a silver case with Fischer's name engraved on it. The museum curator told Handri that she had wanted to get rid of the skull for twelve years. The box and its contents had been handed to her in 1997 when the Volkekunde Department at the university was closed. She was now only too happy to return it to my department. It seemed as if Fischer's eugenics had come home to roost. But how did the Volkekunde Department make use of Fischer's eugenics toolkit, and why was it, along with the skull, hidden away in a dusty cardboard box in a cupboard at the University Museum? Was there anything to hide or were these simply the remnants of a discredited science? Had Fischer visited Stellenbosch and left behind his poisoned chalice?

The skull and the Fischer hair table provoked panic amongst senior university managers concerned about the potential damage these objects could do to their efforts to create an image of a transformed post-apartheid institution. The skull was immediately sent off for forensic investigation. The report found that it was a 35-50-year-old female of mixed ancestry ("not Xhosa, Zulu or Caucasian") and was not an exhumed skull from a coffin or grave. It concluded that this embalmed human skull belonged to a designated anatomy facility and that is had been acquired legally in terms of the Human Tissue Act. But this was not the end of the story. The University of Cape Town's physical anthropologist, Professor Alan Morris, did his own investigation, and identified the skull as that of a man in his 30s or 40s at death, the cranial shape of the skull indicated Khoisan genetic ancestry and it was probably that of a pauper.[87] As far as the lawyers on university's risk assessment committee were concerned, the skull in the cupboard posed no threat to the institution's reputation. But the controversy wouldn't go away. For months after the discovery of the skull and Fischer's eugenics toolkit, the Afrikaans newspaper *Die Burger* published letters from outraged Stellenbosch University alumni vehemently denying any connection between German racial science and Stellenbosch University's Volkekunde Department. Volkekunde had a dodgy enough reputation without now being tainted by associations with Nazi scientists.

The closure of the Volkekunde Department at Stellenbosch University in 1997 had been inevitable given its embarrassing association with apartheid's Bantustan policies (Separate Development). The two chief architects of apartheid, H.F. Verwoerd and Werner

[87] Professor Alan G. Morris, *Report on the Human Skull from Stellenbosch Anthropology* (An1191), 1 May 2014.

Eiselen,[88] had both been intimately associated with Volkekunde at the university. This apartheid baggage was completely at odds with Mandela's post-apartheid Rainbow Nation. Yet, despite the purging of the Volkekundiges that had taken took place in the 1990s, real and metaphorical skeletons in the cupboard kept popping up. Although some anxious university managers and alumni believed that the spectre of Fischer and German racial science in Stellenbosch threatened the university's post-apartheid transformation brand, the late Professor Russell Botman, the university's first black rector, refused to bury these scientific relics of a tainted past. He arranged a press conference at which my colleagues and I tried to explain the importance of further investigations into the history of Volkekunde at the university. The Afrikaans press ran a series of articles with sensationalist headlines that implied that we were latter-day Simon Wiesenthals hunting for Nazi scientists in the tranquil vineyards and picturesque university town of Stellenbosch. Alumni were incensed at the very idea that Stellenbosch University could have had anything to do with the ideas of a Nazi scientist.

Professor Hermann Giliomee led the attack, claiming that Verwoerd, his Stellenbosch University colleagues and Afrikaner nationalists were not in any way influenced by Nazism and German eugenics. More than a decade earlier, he had argued against any comparison between apartheid and Nazism. In 1996, at the time of the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation, Giliomee launched his presidential address to the South African Institute for Race Relations with the assertion that the analogy between apartheid and Nazism was mere anti-apartheid rhetoric and "propaganda in a war in which the higher moral ground was decisive".[89] He insisted that it was both historically inaccurate and politically opportunistic to claim that 'the NP [National Party] and the Afrikaner Broederbond were influenced by the Nazi Party'. He also denied that apartheid could be understood as a "crime against humanity". Yet, even if there was no mass extermination of black South Africans during apartheid, the Nazi racial ordinances that my grandmother alluded to in her letters to my father in the 1930s and early 1940s looked remarkably similar to myriad of racial laws that shaped the everyday lives of black people

---

[88] The South African historian Andrew Bank has written about the profound influence that the German scholar on African linguistics Carl Meinhof had on Eiselen's thinking. Although Meinhof, who died in June 1946, subscribed to prevailing cultural racist ideas in Europe, the historian of African linguistics Sara Pugach believes that, like Eiselen, Meinhof was more influenced by German missionary thinking on racial difference than Nazi eugenics. Eiselen founded Volkekunde at Stellenbosch in 1924 and went on to become a key state intellectual and policymaker during the early apartheid period.

[89] Cited from Claudia Braude ed. 2001, 'Introduction' to *Contemporary Jewish Writing in South Africa: An Anthology*. Cape Town: David Philip, p. Iix.. See Braude's introduction for a more extended discussion of this debate on analogies between apartheid and the Nazism.

under National Party rule. Refusing to acknowledge these resemblances between the two regimes, Giliomee insisted that Verwoerd's grand vision of apartheid drew its inspiration from a combination of conservative Dutch Reformed Church theology and US Jim Crow segregationist laws. It had absolutely nothing to do with German racial science, he insisted. While this may have been true for the post-World War II period, when racial science became thoroughly discredited internationally, eugenics ideas did not entirely vanish. Instead, they morphed into apartheid-inspired notions of innate cultural and ethnic differences between whites and blacks and amongst African "tribes". The historian Saul Dubow observes that while a few prominent Afrikaner scientists dabbled in eugenics during the first half of the last century, Afrikaner nationalists had always been somewhat ambivalent about a science that could be used to assert English superiority by drawing attention to the inherited intellectual and physiological deficiencies of poor white Afrikaners. Yet, when it came to political affiliations, Verwoerd and Vorster made absolutely no secret of their war-time sympathies for Nazi Germany and, by default, signalled their admiration of Hitler's racial programmes. This shameful past had to be permanently erased from the historical record.

The spectre of Eugen Fischer in Stellenbosch suggested that the past was leaking into the present, and from the perspective of conservative alumni and professors, it had to be plugged at all costs. In a press release in 2013, the rector Russell Botman came out in strong support of confronting this unsettling past: "The researchers say they consider it their moral duty to pose critical questions about the context, focus, relevance and legacy of conducting science at their institution. I agree. We look our past squarely in the eye; similarly our future." He added, "As at key moments in the past, Stellenbosch University finds itself at a crossroads. We have long since left the *laager*.[90] We need to keep our momentum and face the future confidently".

Finding the hair colour chart - with its thirty different shades of hair from blonde to black – in a shiny silver case with Dr Fischer's name engraved on it was bound to cause a furore. Yet, in the 1920s, it was part of an internationally approved eugenics toolkit, and almost every university had one. The Namibian anthropologist Robert Gordon recalled seeing these eye and hair tables in the 1960s when he was an undergraduate student at Stellenbosch. While skulls, skeletons and cadavers are all still standard teaching objects in anatomy departments and medical schools, Fischer's toolkit had become anachronistic after the war. Yet, C.S. "Coert" Grobbelaar, a senior lecturer in Zoology and Physical

[90] A *laager* is an Afrikaans word for a defensive circle of wagons.

Anthropology at Stellenbosch relied on Fischer's hair table for his 1952 study of the eye, hair and skin colour in male students at the university.[91] Perhaps Grobbelaar was simply slightly behind the scientific times. By then, physical anthropologists virtually everywhere in the world had come to realise that eugenics and racial hygiene were no longer considered to be respectable science. Given this post-war scientific consensus, most Volkekundiges and physical anthropologists at Stellenbosch University jettisoned their earlier obsessions with anthropometry and the measurement and classification of racialised bodies. They increasingly began to focus on ethnographies of ethnic groups and "tribes". But, like Fischer's racial science, this was not innocent scientific inquiry. Many of these studies ended up being used to justify apartheid's policies of Separate Development. These studies tended to treat cultural, tribal and ethnic differences as if they were biologically determined and inscribed in the genes and in the blood. So, eugenics ideas about the inheritance of racial characteristics were seamlessly transposed onto the more politically correct terrain of culture and ethnicity. Eugenics was dead, long live eugenics.

In September 2014, Mark Kaplan and I drove 1500 kilometres from Cape Town, to Williston, and then on the Rehoboth Baster town eighty kilometres south of Windhoek. We wanted to do film the Rehoboth museum and document local versions of Eugen Fischer's 1908 visit. We also wished to trace the extraordinarily lengthy journey the Basters undertook in the 1860s when they left Williston and trekked northwards. Driving through the harsh Karoo desert we tried to imagine the hardships the Williston Basters must have endured. Despite the support of the German Rhenish missionaries, they kept being pushed further north, until they were finally offered land in South West Africa. There they became allies of the German colonial authorities in the wars against the Herero and Nama. Later, when the apartheid government took custodianship of South West Africa they once again became aligned themselves with the powerful state. Like South African Jews after the Second World War, their liminal, inbetween status – caught twixt-and-between the white colonial settlers and the indigenous people - predisposed them towards collaborating with the colonial and apartheid authorities. These tactical alliances came back to bite them when Namibia became independent in 1990. SWAPO, the former liberation movement-turned-ruling party, did not look sympathetically upon the Basters' history of colonial collaboration. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the story of their gruelling *Groot*

[91] Grobbelaar, C.S. "The distribution of and correlation between eye, hair and skin colour in male students at the University of Stellenbosch", *Annals of the University of Stellenbosch.* Edited by Prof. C.A. du Toit and Co-editors Prof. F. X. Laubscher, Prof. J.P.J van Rensburg and Prof. R. W. Wilcocks, Volumbe XXVIII, Section A, No.1 (1952).

Trek of the 1860s and their struggles to establish of a Rhennish Mission town in Rehoboth do not feature in Namibian school history books. Mark and I had travelled almost 1500 kilometres to hear from Rehobothers how they themselves made sense of their complicated colonial past.

Upon arriving in Rehoboth, we made our way to the museum, where we met the Baster Kaptein, John McNab. I had expected the Kaptein to refer to how Fischer had objectified and dehumanised the Basters with his anthropometric photographs and measurements of their bodies. Instead, he provided us with a glowing account of Fischer's 1908 visit to Rehoboth. The Kaptein, a seventy-five-year-old Baster leader, former teacher and seasoned politician, portrayed Fischer as a man who had respected the Basters, and left them with an invaluable ethnographic archive. He said that Fischer had measured and photographed every conceivable part of Basters' bodies, but he had not disrespected them by asking them to strip naked. Fischer had also left the Basters with detailed genealogies and rich ethnographic material about their culture and history. Although the Kaptein McNab had read that after Fischer returned to Germany he had become involved in the forced sterilization of hundreds of "Rhineland Bastard"[92] children, he insisted that Fischer had done no wrong during his time in Rehoboth. I was perplexed. I could not reconcile the Kaptein's account of Fischer's 1908 research in Rehoboth with his later complicity with Nazi racial hygiene. Was Fischer's 1908 eugenics research as innocent as Kaptein McNab wanted me to believe, or was there a line of continuity between this study and what was to follow?

Fischer had become for me the link in a chain that connected Washington DC, Berlin, Williston, Rehoboth and Stellenbosch. These unanticipated connections between different times and places reflected the entanglement of the Robinski past with histories of colonialism, racial science, Nazism and apartheid. When I first began to search for traces of Eugen Robinski, I never imagined that scratching around in Williston's archives would take me to Rehoboth, only to return me to Berlin and, later, to my own university. Fischer's 1908 Rehoboth study had set in motion a chain of scientific ideas that eventually boomeranged back to Europe. This looping story had come full circle, and the lines between my personal, family and professional lives had become thoroughly blurred along the way.

[92] The "Rhineland Bastards" (in German: *Rheinlandbastard*) was a derogatory term used in the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany to describe Afro-German children of mixed German and African parentage, who were fathered by Africans serving as French colonial troops occupying the Rhineland after World War I. During the Nazi period many of these children considered inferior to "pure Aryans" and were subjected to compulsory sterilization (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhineland_Bastard).

TWENTY-FOUR

LIVING IN THE SHADOWS OF THE RUINS

We received your message from December. With us all still the same. All siblings have work and are content. Father's health is satisfactory. With love and a kiss.
(International Red Cross telegram from my grandfather in Berlin sent to my father on 22 August 1942)

This Memorial Book gives those murdered their names and dignity back. It is a memorial and at the same time a reminder that every single life has a name and its own truly unique tragic story.
(Preface of the *Berliner Gedenkbuch* written by the former Federal President of Germany Horst Kohler)

My father in his later years, with his signature beret.

In 1998 Antjie Krog signed my copy of her acclaimed book, *Country of My Skull*, with the words: "To a shadow follower". At the time, I assumed she was referring to my essay, "Silence in My Father's House", which had just been published. In the essay, I reflected on questions of memory in relation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, indigenous land claims and my personal forays into the Robinski family archives in Berlin. I was not sure to interpret Krog's comment. Was she implying that dwelling too much amongst ghosts was bad for one's health? Was it a criticism or simply an observation? Whatever it was meant to be, it resonated with my impulse to forever leave behind the world of spectres

and shadows. But then the letters arrived. My ancestral spirits wanted to communicate with me, and I had little choice but to respond.

In July 2013 I received an email from Ute responding to an early draft chapter of the book. A few days earlier she had recommended that I join the Legacy Forum for second-generation Holocaust survivors. She was concerned about the psychological effects that reading the letters from Germany could have on me.

> Dear Steven
>
> I have completed the revision, scribbling into the margins… What does come across is the incredible pain that you are carrying with you… Every culture has specific archetypal myths. I am thinking of the Medusa of the Greeks. Whoever came face to face with her turned to stone. In the Jewish myth: the Story of Lot: in the face of horror one turns into a pillar of salt. Be careful, Steven. Your father kept these things from you because he wanted to shield you from them. And he wanted you to be happy, to live a normal life. I am relieved that you are joining the Legacy group on Thursday. Sharing this terrible burden with others may give you some relief…

I didn't attend the Legacy Forum meeting that night. I had received news earlier that day that one of the members had committed suicide; his father, a survivor, had also committed suicide some years earlier. It was not a good idea for a newcomer to arrive under such tragic circumstances. In any case, I was uneasy with the idea of slotting into the second-generation survivor role. But what if I really did belong to this category?

***

The ruins of Berlin after the war; maybe my father visited Berlin and took this photograph or someone sent it to him.

I had thought that by placing the Stolpersteine in front of the buildings that my father's family were deported from, I could now close a chapter on this past. But this was not to be.

Edith's eyes have continued to follow me, everywhere. They implore me to respond, yet I still cannot fathom what it is exactly that she wants. How can I release her restless spirit? Xhosa people in South Africa have the *ukubuyisa* ritual to bring the spirits of the dead back home. I once visited a Jewish psychic who told me that the shattered souls of my father's deceased family had to be treated before they could move on in the spirit world. Believing in such things does not come easily to me. I have been thoroughly schooled in the modern, secular truths of scientific rationality.

My search which began in Washington DC in 1996 has kept pulling me back to the ghosts in Berlin. This journey has taken me from Berlin, to Williston, to Rehoboth, back to Berlin and then, finally, to Stellenbosch. Along the way I confronted the uncanny and lethal trajectories of racial science and eugenics in southern Africa and Europe and learnt how these influenced the fate of my father's family. After all these years of chasing shadows and collecting shards of memory, I was finally able to piece together the fragments and tell the story of what happened. I wish I could now tell my father all of this and reassure him that he did all he could to rescue his family. I would tell him that the cards were stacked against his success. I would explain to him how my own discipline of anthropology, along with Verwoerd and his fellow Afrikaner nationalists, was ultimately responsible. Perhaps telling this story could be my way of appeasing the restless spirits of my ancestors. This could be my *ukubuyisa*, my way of breaking the silence in my father's house and bringing the spirts of my ancestors home. Yet, Edith's sad eyes still stare at me, and the spectres of Berlin show no signs of disappearing..

Bibliography

Angrick, Andrej, Peter Klei, *The "Final Solution" in Riga: Exploitation and Annihilation, 1941-1944*

Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.*
Barthes, R.

Baur, Erwin, Eugen Fischer and Fritz Lenz 1931 *Human Heredity.* Translated by Eden & Cedar Paul. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd; New York: The MacMillan Company.

Arendt, Hannah, 1943. "We Refugees". *Menorah.* p.263.

Arendt, Hannah, (1951) 1968. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Florida: Harcourt Publishers.

Black, Edwin. 2003. *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race.* Washington D.C. Dialog Press.

Braude, Claudia 2001, 'Introduction' to *Contemporary Jewish Writing in South Africa: An Anthology.* Cape Town: David Philip.

Ehmann, A. 1998. 'From Colonial Racism to Nazi Population Policy: The Role of the So-called Mischlinge. In Michael Berenbaum and Abrahm J. Peck eds, *The Holocaust and History: The Known and the Unknown, the Disputed and the Reexamined.* Washington D.C. & Bloomington and Indianapolis: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Indiana University Press

Endelman, Todd M. 2002**.** The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fischer, Eugen, Die *Rehobother Bastards* und das Bastardisierungsproblem beim Menschen. Anthropologische und ethnologische Studien am Rehobother Bastardvolk in Deutsch-Sudwestafrika, Jena 1913, reprint Graz 1961.

Goldhagen, Daniel. 1996. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust.* Alfred A. Knopf Publishers

Gould, Stephen Jay 1983. "Science and Jewish Immigration," in *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes.* W.W. Norton.

Gould, Stephen Jay, 1981. *The Mismeasure of Man*, W.W. Norton.

Grobbelaar, C.S., 1952. "The distribution of and correlation between eye, hair and skin colour in male students at the University of Stellenbosch". In *Annals of the University of Stellenbosch.* Edited by Prof. C.A. du Toit and Co-editors Prof. F. X. Laubscher, Prof. J.P.J van Rensburg and Prof. R. W. Wilcocks, Volumbe XXVIII, Section A, No.1 (1952).

Hirsch, Marianne. 2012a, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. See also, Hirsch, 2012b, *The Generation of Posmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust.*

Judt, Tony (with Timothy Snyder), 2012. *Thinking the Twentieth Century.* William Heinemann: London.

Krog, Antjie, Nosisis Mpolweni and Kopano Ratele (2009), *There was this Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission Testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile.* Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press

Krouse, Martin, 2013. Confounding expectations? Thing of Beauty, The Black Photo Album. *Mail & Guardian* Arts Section, Friday November 22 to 28 2013,

Lipton, Sara, 2014. "The Invention of the Jewish Nose". *New York Review of Books.* http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/gallery/2014/nov/14/invention-jewish-nose/ November 14, 2014, 12:02 p.m.

Marrus, 1981, Michael R. "Review of 'Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945' by Bernard Wasserstein." *The International History Review*, Vol. 3, No.2 (Apr., 1981), pp. 294-296.

Mendelsohn Richard and Milton Shain, 2008, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History.* Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers,

Morris, Alan G. 2014. *Report on the Human Skull from Stellenbosch Anthropology* (An1191), 1 May 2014.

Pearson, Karl and Margaret Moul, 1925, *The problem of alien immigration into Great Britain, illustrated by an examination of Russian and Polish Jewish children. Part I.* Published in the Annals of Human Genetics's archive

Porter, Theodore M. 2005. *Karl Pearson: The Scientific Life in a Statistical Age*

Robins, Steven. 1998 "Silence in My Father's House: Memory, Nationalism and Narratives of the Body", in Carli Coetzee & Sarah Nuttal, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, Oxford University Press, 1998,

Roseman, Mark, 2000. *The Past in Hiding*. London: Penguin Books

Schmuhl, Hans-Walter. 2008, *The Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology , Human Heredity and Eugenics, 2927-1945: Crossing Boundaries.* Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Boston: Springer Publishers.

Shain, Milton. 1994. *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in South Africa.* Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press

Spiro, Jonathan Peter. 2009 *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant.* Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont Press.

Steinmetz, George, 2007. *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa.* Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press

Wasserstein, Bernard. 1979. Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945. London & Oxford: Institute of Jewish Affairs and Clarendon Press