

Son 'reborn' 50 years on

By CHRIS ROBINSON

THE son of a woman murdered by one of Australia's most notorious serial killers will this week get his first look at family photographs and documents from his childhood, half a century after his mother's death.

Mark Berkman was just eight years old when his mother Pnina became the first victim of Eric Edgar Cooke, stabbed to death in her South Perth flat on the night of January 29, 1959.

An article about Mr Berkman — published in *STM* a fortnight ago — triggered interest at the WA Police Historical Society, which found a parcel containing many of Mrs Berkman's belongings — 50 years to the day after her death.

Mr Berkman, whose knowledge of his childhood is limited to a few letters from his parents to relatives and information from WA author Estelle Blackburn about his mother's death, will have the package delivered to his home in Israel, where he is "sitting on needles" in anticipation of its arrival.

"My first reaction was the timing — on exactly the same day of the 50th anniversary, the police called my son and he told me there's a 50-year-old parcel waiting there," he said.

"It is quite incredible, and it's like the past is still continuing ... it feels like some sort of sign or gift. I haven't got any photos of my own, not even one, so this will be a major discovery."

The package, which includes 35 photographs of Mr Berkman and his family as well as a school report, his parents' wedding certificate and divorce papers, had been kept by the Cooke murders' principal investigator, Bill Nelson, who had tried to track down Mr Berkman, but with no success.

It was handed to the society following Mr Nelson's death in 2003, where it remained until the society's Peter Skehan read the *STM* article and police were able to contact Mr Berkman's son in Melbourne.



CHILDHOOD MEMORIES: Author Estelle Blackburn receives items from Insp Wayne Silver belonging to murder victim Pnina Berkman.

Picture: LINCOLN BAKER



Pnina Berkman

Eric Cooke

Mr Skehan said despite the significant time since Mrs Berkman's murder, her belongings had not been forgotten.

"It's quite apparent (Mr Nelson) had been trying to locate Mark to return them to the family, but could not locate him," Mr Skehan said.

"On being aware — as a result of the article in *The Sunday Times* — that Mark was in Israel, we passed the material back from the historical society to CIB Perth to be handed over to Mark, so we were able to complete the circle."

After being taken by his father to Melbourne following the murder and then moving to Tel Aviv — where he has lived since — at age 12, Mr Berkman had virtually no recollection of his mother or his Perth childhood, with his only information on her death being she had been "killed by a madman".

He first became aware of the

details by reading Blackburn's book, *Broken Lives*, in late 2004 and has since forged a strong friendship with the author, calling her "Mum's guardian angel".

He compared the search for information about his past with countrymen in Israel searching for details about relatives who died in the Holocaust.

"This is like my private Holocaust — I'm managing to get the information as it comes along, and it's amazing," he said.

"If it wasn't for the article, that parcel would have never been found and all the history of my family would just be wiped out."

Blackburn met Insp Wayne Silver at police headquarters this week to receive the parcel on Mr Berkman's behalf.

"I'm absolutely delighted for him, because this is an absolute treasure trove," she said.

"For someone who remembered nothing of his childhood before eight, now he's got childhood photos and family documents."

Blackburn praised the efforts of the police in helping Mr Berkman to see a more complete picture of his family's past.

"It's wonderful that Peter Skehan is still involved and has made the effort on behalf of Pnina Berkman and her son — he's obviously touched by the story," she said.