

RAKUNAI MISSION STATION

by Fr Carl Laufer, MSC

To assist the reader to appreciate more fully the lifestyle of the murdered Catechist, we append a brief outline of the geography, ethnic composition and Mission history of Rakunai Mission Station.

1- The Geography of Rakunai. The area known as Rakunai lies close to the northernmost tip of the island of New Britain, formerly called New Pomerania. It is more specifically on the Gazelle Peninsula section of the island, and is about three hours' walk, in a south westerly direction, from the capital Rabaul. As the meaning of the native name, Rakunai, (Grass-land), suggests it was, aforetime, quite an extensive stretch of grassland which was later taken over either by scrub or cultivated fields. The land around Rakunai is sometimes three hundred metres above sea level, and is interspersed with tree lined vallies, which afford natural boundaries for sub-districts and parishes. Four major roads converge near the Mission Station, which appears on all military maps of the last war, as "Four Ways Mission". The village itself of Rakunai, together with the predominantly Methodist community of Navunarum, was on the Talliligap or Kokopo Road. The Burma Road adjoins the area called Nangnagunan, (or Raluan No. 2, whereas Raluan No. 1 belongs to the more northerly neighbouring station of Malagunan, on Rabaul Harbour.) On the road which runs north, the Boller Road, is Vunalaka, as well as Rapui, (which then belonged to Malagunan.) Vunalaka and Rapui are separated from Vunavavar Mission Station by a deep valley. On the southern side of Vagaramut Road are the villages of Vunavidir and Kikitabu, and these lie on the flank of the

Wesleyan village of Rakotop. All these Catechist outposts, Nagnagunan, Vunalaka, Vunavidir, and Kikitabu, belong to Rakunai Mission, and because of the road system spoken of, all are easy of access.

2- The Ethnic composition of Rakunai. The natives of Rakunai district all belong to the Melanesian Gunantuna race, and all speak the same, so-called, North Coast Dialect. They were sociologically divided into coast people, (Nagnagunan, Vunalaka, Rapui,) and bush people, (Rakunai, Vunavidir, Kikitabu,) the distinction being that one group had marriage connections along the coast, the other in the hinterland. Both groups are farmers. Until recent times Rakunai always had a weekly market, where produce from many distant villages was traded. These days all farm produce goes to Rabaul Market by truck. The Gunantuna folk for years past had not been accustomed to live in closed village, and even today most of them live in scattered individual homes, or at most surrounded by their immediate family group. Individual group living, results in a pattern of uniformity within the group - so many of the younger generation are interrelated. The most influential member of a family group or native community, holds the rank of chieftain, and it is his duty to care for the property of all the group or community as if it were his own. No business affecting the group can be conducted without his approval. These days the Government authorities have installed their own chiefs, but these are really only puppets, and have no more authority than the traditional chiefs allow them to have. The whole Gunantuna people is divided into two totems, and membership of one or other totem determines what marriage relationships can be entered into. A native of totem A can only marry a native of totem B, and vice versa. Two natives belonging to the

same totem, - even though their blood relationship is far distant by European standards, and even if they have previously hardly ever met, - are never allowed to marry, - as this is considered in the same way as we consider incest. The Mission, so far, has made no attempt to interfere with this tribal custom. Chaos would result if whitemen tried to change this pattern of social behaviour. No doubt some change will occur, but only over a long period of time, after careful discussion between whitemen and the local people.

3- Marriages, legally, can only take place between two people of different totems, but again only after the bride price has been discussed and agreed upon by both families. The phrase, "bride price", sounds inhuman and barbaric to European ears, but it is not a price tag put on the bride, but it is more of a recompense to the relatives of the bride. She has always had to work for her family group, but now will have to work for her husband so some recompense has to be made to her family, by offering them a present of money and goods - called "bride price". This does not give the bride's husband any absolute rights over the bride. His rights over her are only conditional, as we shall soon see. "Bride price" is not degrading for a girl, as many used to think, but quite the opposite. Native girls are quite happy to have a "bride price" placed on them - as high as possible, - the more expensive the "price" asked, the greater their pride, - as this increases their prestige within the community. Again the Mission has done little to interfere with this practice, - except to guard against abuse of the system, and to suggest that the "price" be considered in the nature of an engagement present, which is more in line with Christian practice. On becoming the member of a new family, an individual embraces the responsibilities, laws and duties of the group he or she has joined, - and this

contract binds until death. Even if the individual moves away from family territory, the contract made to the family still holds. In return for faithfully honouring your part of the contract, you are guaranteed protection and livelihood. Small wonder, then, that even from those married into a family strong loyalties are expected. They have to take on responsibility for all family members. There have been many discussions about the merits and otherwise of this arrangement, but the Mission has done nothing as yet to make any change to it, except to keep a watchful eye on it, and, to date, it has been observed that anybody who has made such a family contract and has stood by the rules imposed, has always had a happy life in his or her new relationship.

4- Consider two marriage partners, perforce, of different totems. When they become officially married, they still have links with their original families. When children are born, these may have one or other totem identity. Some are said to be of their mother's bloodline and belong to their father's totem until puberty, when they, then, become the responsibility of their uncle, (their mother's brother). They move into his household, and work on his property. He sees to their education, cares for them, and arranges for their marriages. This avuncular arrangement derives from the history of this race. In times past, a native's future was anything but predictable. A woman, once she was married, left the protection of her family and moved to a strange environment, - which always entailed a certain amount of risk to herself and to her children. Her closest support and recourse was her brother. If her husband died, a wife would move in to live with one or other of her brothers. Both Mission and Government authorities have always urged that, in any family, the father should be the one with full

authority, but, if he decides otherwise, or if he dies, then, and then only, the uncle legally assumes his responsibilities.

5- The bride and children of a chief enjoy a position of honour among the people, as long as the chief lives, but rarely, after he has died, - which makes what happened in the case of To Rot something to be remarked upon. It has to be said, that, when To Rot commenced his ministry, his father's authority was wholeheartedly behind him, but the fact that To Rot continued to have such great authority after his father's death, can only be explained in consequence of his own great strength of character. He inherited neither rank nor possessions from his father, and none of his sisters were influential enough to enhance his position in any way. This is a brief outline of To Rot's family background, insofar as it involves his father's position and that of his wife and children. We will now leave the sociological concerns of Rakunai, to take note of the religious background from which the Catechist's life and ministry sprang.

6- Excerpts from the history of the Mission Station at Rakunai. In 1882 the first Missionary of the Sacred Heart landed on Matupit Island off the coast of Rabaul. Eleven years later on the other side of Rabaul Harbour, - opposite Matupit Island, - the Station of Malagunan was founded (1893). The priest there, Father Laufer, tried everything to get the natives of the coast area into some kind of unity with the natives of the nearby mountainous area known as Rakunai. The mountain range at that time was not safe, even dangerous, for whitemen, but many natives made their way through the mountains via the Tavakala Valley to meet the priest. On Easter Monday, 1896, Father Matthias

Rascher, accompanied by a Brother, set out on an expedition from Malagunan into the interior. They followed the valley which leads up to what is now the Station of Rakunai. There they met up with Chief To Kakao, a well-known native who had been waiting for them for two days. Father Rascher wrote in his diary at that time, "Rakunai is a popular market place for the local people who come to it from places far away. It would, therefore, be an ideal spot for the site of a Mission Station", (6.4.1896).

7- In 1898, there was a spectacular Baptism ceremony in Malagunan. The first adults from Rakunai were received into the Church at this time and received their spiritual rebirth through the Sacrament. One of the chiefs to be baptised was To Pula, the father of To Rot. As Catechists were few and far between, they newly baptised were left to their own devices back in their bushland home, and that until such time as the young Father Ernest Hisgen, on the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul in 1901, was able to leave the Malagunan Mission to start work on the new station. Initially he faced incredible problems. He had to gather together the already baptised who knew nothing of Sunday obligations, and seek out those who were not yet Catholics. The Methodists were already well established in the area and created all kinds of difficulties for him. These teachers from Fiji and Samoa were not adverse to acts of violence, of which mission history proffers ample evidence. After a year of exhausting work, Father Hisgen's health deteriorated, and he was replaced by Father Joseph Meier. At the same time the vast parish of Rakunai was divided, and the eastern half, to-day called, Tavullu, received its own spiritual guide in the person of Father Joseph Winthuis.

8- When he took over Rakunai, in May 1902, Father Joseph Meier found that the census book contained the names of from four to five hundred Catholics. At most only about eighty of these ever came to Church. After a year of hard work, he was able to see hundreds of children attending Church services, and a hundred of them were enrolled in his school. He stationed Catechists in two areas; and a Brother helped in the school. With the help of the chief, he was able in April 1904, to complete the building of a big Church. However, the natives remained mainly tepid and uncooperative. On one occasion as he preached against the evil practices of the secret societies, some of the men of the congregation jumped out of the windows, and disappeared into the bush so as not to be part of what was being said. He was, thereafter, careful to confine his preaching to more positive topics.

9- In 1906 Father Meier's health caused him to leave Rakunai, too, and seek to recuperate in his homeland. During his absence Father Winthuis was responsible for the welfare of both Rakunai and Tavullu. He tried, by allowing more people to receive the sacrament of Baptism, to frustrate the efforts of the loud-mouthed Methodists. This had its advantages and disadvantages. As things were, it offered an easy solution, because if the two stations were to be split up again, then because of the increased number of Catholics on each station, the Methodist hold in the district would be broken. When Father Joseph Meier returned to the Mission in 1909, he went off to found a Mission Station in Mope, and he was replaced in Rakunai by Father Emil Jakobi. As his predecessors had done, Father Jakobi found a willing helper in Chief To Pula, and he baptised his third child, Peter To Rot, in 1912, but Father Jakobi, too came to a cross-roads in his life in Rakunai. As already indicated,

there were many local natives who were Catholics only in name, and soon gave up all practice of the Faith. Father Jakobi did his best to have these people rethink their position, but eventually was compelled to leave the station forever. This happened in the Autumn of 1922, and when Father Jakobi's health, soon after deteriorated, Rakunai's name was not well-spoken of among the missionaries. After Father Jakobi had left Rakunai, Father Joseph Bender was appointed to look after the vacant station until the spring of 1926, and this despite the fact he had a heart problem. To Rot received his First Holy Communion from Father Bender. Father Bender was replaced by Father Ulrich, who stayed until the spring of 1929, when, despite his advanced years, he set off to found a new mission station in Kilenge. Father Bender came to the rescue again, and stayed at Rakunai, until 1st April 1930, when Father Laufer, the author of this article, was installed as priest-in-charge. He held this position until 4th November 1949, to be followed by Father Joseph Theler.

10- It is of my twenty years of missionary work in Rakunai that I have been asked to write. It was during this time that I came to know To Rot. The first two years in Rakunai were hard for me as a missionary. It took me a long time to reach any understanding of the peculiar attitudes of the people, which had not been helped by frequent changes of priest-in-charge, and then I had to win their trust. My previous studies in ethnic relations came in of great use. The natives saw that I was interested in their lifestyle, their traditions and their immediate needs. They saw that I could discuss matters which were of concern only to themselves. I tried, at the same time, not to compromise our Christian views on life in any way; but ever to give careful consideration to other ways of thinking. I often asked the advice of Chief To

Pula and other elders as to the opportuneness of the type of business I wished to conduct, and the ways and means I proposed to use to do so. But enough! Everything fell into shape for me as soon as a divided people united into one homogeneous whole.

11- After many attempts had failed, we were able to persuade the people, first from the local areas, and then from further out, to come to the Station on Sunday evenings. We held discussions about current affairs of both civil and religious nature. Interest was not very strong, as the elders in the group saw that their authority could be in question, but a sense of community responsibility began to develop at the expense of contrary advice from some of the elders. During 1930, seven thousand people received Holy Communion, and the number swelled to thirty two thousand by 1939. The school flourished. Illegal marriages were rectified. The birthrate increased. The Church calendar became filled with days of celebration. The parish grew in size. Rakunai once more had a respected name in Mission circles.

12- To Pulis, and his son To Rot, played an active part in all the above events. I spoke with them about my plans and my worries, over many an evening. To Rot exhibited a comprehension and determination such as I had never before found in a native. To Rot became a necessary part of my life, and on evenings when he did not come to me, I felt very depressed. And that is no exaggeration. A missionary who works, day after day, with the interests of the natives so much at heart, feels the need to talk about things, with someone who shares similar interests, as often as possible. This is how I could speak with To Rot, finding no barrier between us. It is true that, maybe, I offered him a lot, but it

is also true that I received a lot from him, for which I am ever grateful. In gratitude for this help, I am proud to be able to testify to the exemplary manner of his soul-caring life and his glorious death for the Faith. I had waited so impatiently for the War to end, so that we missionaries would be free to leave the Japanese Concentration Camp, and how shocked was I when the first news of Rakunal brought to me was that the Catechist had been murdered by the Japanese. I immediately informed the Head of the Mission, Monsignor Scharmach, about it and sent a short report to our former, now retired. Mission Bishop, Monsignor Vesters, in Melbourne. He published my account in his weekly newsletter, and later on sent me an enlarged photograph of the Catechist, which I placed in our Church at Rakanal. Lieutenant Doddridge, from the Military Court for the Trial of War Crimes, visited me while I was rebuilding the Mission buildings at Rakunal, and asked me for information in regard to the To Rot affair. Because of this report, the court in Rabaul received orders from Headquarters in Melbourne, to initiate legal proceedings against the Japanese, Meshida, who was already being tried for other crimes he had committed. The report I gave to Lieutenant Doddridge, was published in translation in the Hiltruper Monthly Review under the title: "A Catechist becomes a Martyr". Father Meyer also published a French translation in the Notre Dame Annals, (Switzerland). An English version appeared in an American Magazine.

13- Father Otto who had published my "Too Much Christo", in the Bonn "Catholic Missions", wrote to tell me that the story of To Rot's murder was being given publicity all over Germany. I was able to give a copy of the French version to Father Constanzl, at his request, as I journeyed

through Rome. I had my article published in a Native-language version for the Rakunal community, to check that all I had written in my report was in fact true. There were a few errors that had unfortunately slipped into the report - for example, certain facts about his early life - because many of the books containing these facts had been destroyed during the War, and were irreplaceable. A few other details, also, were not quite correct. These we look forward to seeing easily corrected during our Investigation. I am sure that the three priests who are conducting the Investigation will take the greatest care that all of these details will be most accurately presented. So it is that, I swear to God, I have done my best to put into writing, since the end of the War, all available facts about the life and death of the Catechist, Peter To Rot, and have arranged for their publication in the hope that Truth will prevail.

Father Laufer, MSC

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