

## Rosine Krapf d 1844

### A Tragic Heroine

by Judy Aldrick



*Rosine Krapf's grave at Mkomani*

**Rosine Krapf** was one of those tragic missionary wives whose life remains in the shadows. Her sacrifice and extraordinary bravery is forgotten today, but deserves recognition. Born Rosine Dietrich, no picture survives to tell us what she looked like, and the date of her birth remains unknown. She was probably born soon after 1810 the year her future husband the famous missionary Ludwig Krapf was born in Derendingen in Wurtemberg, Germany.

Rosine possibly first saw Ludwig when he was studying theology in Basle, Switzerland, in the 1830's. There he developed a deep religious conviction and took employment with the London based Church Missionary Society who in 1837 sent him to Abyssinia. (present day Ethiopia) When the English missionaries were expelled from Ethiopia in 1838, he found alternative employment in the southern part of Ethiopia then called Shoa. There he preached Christianity under difficult and dangerous conditions to the Oromo people who were being persecuted and enslaved by the Galla of Somalia and the Abyssinians. He had ambitions to start a school and decided a wife to help him and keep him company would be the answer to all his problems and enable him to continue.

He was aware of Rosine who had been betrothed to another missionary called Kuhnlein, who had died in 1837, but they had probably never met. He now wrote to her and proposed an alliance and she said, yes and agreed to meet him in Cairo. With a supreme leap of faith, she left her home and family and travelled out to Egypt. The meeting was a success, they were both of one mind and they married in Cairo in 1842. Their brief marriage was to be a happy one. She was apparently undaunted by a prospect of life to be spent among the people of Shoa, nor was she afraid of the dangers along the way.

But there was to be no return to Shoa. When they approached the frontier from the Red Sea a message came from the King of Shoa forbidding entrance. They returned to Aden. But Ludwig was determined to get back to Shoa and so early the next year in 1843 they travelled to Tigre to meet up with other German missionaries. By this time Rosine was already pregnant, but undeterred she set off on with her husband. First there was a sea crossing by dhow and then an arduous foot safari across rough and desert land to reach the inland kingdom of Tigre. We are told that at last leaving the sandy track behind they came to a rocky defile and it was here that overcome by the heat and fatigue of the journey Rosine gave birth to a baby girl.

The child lived long enough to be baptized by the father and was buried that same evening beneath a tree close to their travelling tent. They named her Eneba, meaning in Amharic - a tear. The local tribesmen showed no sympathy and wanted Rosine and her husband to leave immediately with the rest of the caravan. It was only by offering a cow and some money did Krapf persuade them to allow her to remain for three days to recover her strength. Despite the hardship and sorrow the journey was to be in vain as the King of Tigre refused the Europeans permission to enter his country. Sadly disappointed, the Krapfs travelled back along the rough road to the Coast.

But Ludwig Krapf was not a man to give up easily. Not long after their return to Aden they set off again by dhow, this time for Galla country (in Somalia). The forces of nature were against them. Their dhow sprang a leak in the rough seas. They desperately bailed out the incoming water with the saucepans and bowls Rosine had brought with her for setting up home. When it seemed that all hope was lost, they retired to the small cabin for a last prayer together. Then miraculously, a ship appeared on the horizon and came to their rescue taking them aboard. Not a moment too soon as their dhow soon capsized and slowly sank.

Back they went to Aden, but a few weeks later with favourable winds, they boarded another dhow and sailing via Pangani they reached Zanzibar safely in January 1844. Here Krapf achieved an audience with the powerful Sultan, Seyyid Said, who listened graciously as Ludwig spoke to him in Arabic and told him how he wanted to reach the Galla people and tell them about Christianity. The Sultan was impressed and gave him a letter of recommendation. It said: *This comes from Seyyid Said. Greetings to our subjects, friends and governors. This letter is written on behalf of Dr Krapf, a good man who desires to convert the world to God.*

Armed with the Sultan's letter and still hoping for an opportunity to return to his unfinished work, Ludwig and Rosine sailed to Mombasa, arriving there end January. In March Ludwig visited Tanga to assess the situation there. Finally, he accepted his dream of working with the Oromo was on hold and decided to base himself at Mombasa and do missionary work from there. He had found a house near the harbour, where he and Rosina could live. Rosina was pregnant again and Ludwig hoped a more settled existence would benefit her and lead to a successful delivery of their child. (The house still exists in Mombasa and is called Leven House - see another article of mine in Old Africa Issue 96 p34-37 )

But the tribulations of the Krapf family were not yet over. More were to come. First Ludwig caught malaria and then Rosine. He recovered but she did not. Burning up with high fever she gave birth prematurely to another baby girl. Already in a weakened state she did not recover from childbirth and lingered on hovering between life and death. At one stage in extremity, she began to doubt her faith and cried out that her life had been a waste with nothing achieved. But just before she died her belief returned and she told her husband that she wanted to be buried on the mainland so passers-by could see her grave and be reminded of the reason she had come to Africa - to spread the word of God. Rosine Krapf died on July 5th 1844, her baby girl survived a few more days but then also died.

Ludwig Krapf was distraught by the loss of his wife and child, but grief served to strengthen his resolve. He wrote to his employers the Church Missionary Society using these famous words:

*'Tell the Committee that there is on the East African coast a lonely grave of a member of the Mission cause connected with your Society. This is a sign that you have commenced the struggle with this part of the world....Never mind the victims who may fall ... Only carry it forward, till the East and West of Africa be united in the bonds of Christ'*

Rosine's grave can still be seen at Mkomani next to the creek overlooking Mombasa at a point where caravans used to cross before starting their long journeys up country. A monument to Ludwig Krapf was put up in 1930 and placed on a small hill nearby.



Despite this unpromising beginning Ludwig Krapf went on to found Rabai the first mission station in Kenya and earn a place in history. Rosine unlike her wellknown husband is almost forgotten today. Missionary wives were often the first casualties, and many died in childbirth in the early years. It is important that their courage and suffering be

remembered and the part they played in the front line of the missionary endeavour be recorded.

Much of the information for this article has been taken from E C Dawson, 1930, Missionary Heroines of the Cross, London, p 175-79

The photographs were taken by the author