

SPRINTING WITH LAST STRENGTH TOWARD THE GOAL

(Sept. 1974 - June 1976)

"I had a dream last night," John Ovuoba told me as we walked in the shade of a tall eucalyptus tree in the garden of "Lingua House", our new home in Jos. He moved as usual with the help of crutches, and only his tiptoes touching the ground.

"I saw a long truck, piled high with furniture, and Nnajiuphu (Father, Master) on top of it. I think this means that they will be arriving today."



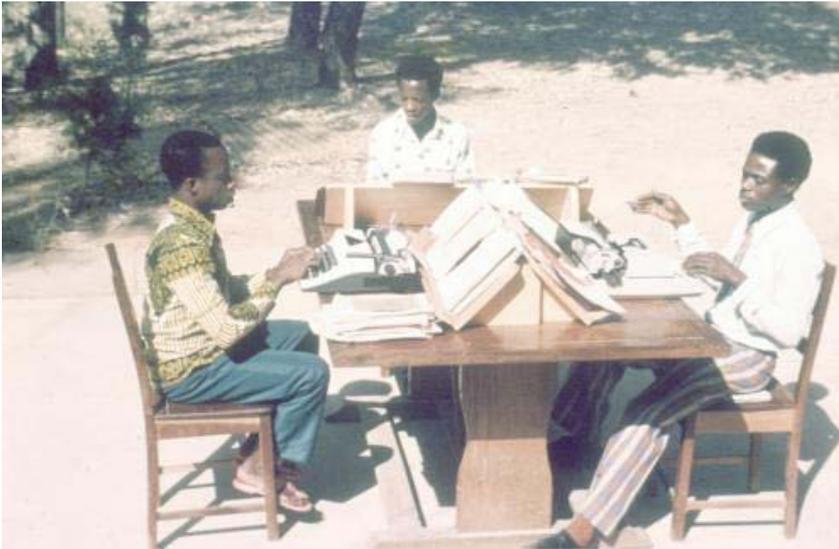
"Lingua House" in Jos

By "they", he meant Paul and the other co-workers, together with all their belongings. John's dream came true, they all arrived that day. The move had cost time and sweat, but soon everybody felt at home in our new surroundings.

Our Swiss furlough had proved to be a refreshing time spiritually and physically. We felt assured that the translation project could be completed in the following 18 months. The Swiss Church had renewed their pledge to provide the Ikwo and Ezaa expenses of the project, while our own friends supported the Izi side of the work and prayed for all of us.

For our two older children, Bernhard and Daniela, Lingua House was not a new home. Daniela had been living there before, for one year, and Bernhard for two years before, when Lingua House was still the children's home. I often marvelled at the Lord's wonderful provision of this house. It had been constructed only two years before with the help of many gifts from Christians overseas - and now we were allowed to live in it. It was so perfectly fitting for our needs that it seemed to me as if it had been tailor-made for us!

Hadn't I felt the same way with our former homes too? Even the very first house in Chief Mbamu's compound - our most difficult months - had been an ideal location for that time, providing us with an 'entrance ticket' into the Izi community. The same with Chief Echiegu's house, where we were surrounded with spoken Izi from dawn till dusk - ideal for language learning! And then the compound in Echara with its numerous buildings for our workers, again, perfectly planned! And now Lingua House!



The typists William (Ikwo), Demian (Ezaa) and Emmanuel (Izi) were occupied every day with typing and retyping

The village testings continued in spite of the enormous distance. Two or three times a year, one of the translators from each dialect would travel south for the checking of the translated books, revised passages, and any difficult verses or expressions. Nothing which had not previously been checked with uninvolved villagers must go into the final manuscripts! Only then could we be sure that the book really talked the language of the people!

Living in a town brought us another welcome change: opportunities for fellowship abounded, as Jos was an area where many missions had their headquarters. Hillcrest School, whose 450 students mostly came from missionary homes, was a center for social activities, including Bible studies, plays, musicals, films, recitals etc. And it was good for us to be closer to our own Institute of Linguistics group - we had become so isolated and starved of fellowship that sharing and interaction with others needed a special effort on our part.

The Lord probably knew that we needed all the encouragement possible for the next test of our faith.

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One evening in February 1975 when I was cooking supper (Paul had gone on a week-long trip to the Izi area), I was startled by hearing painful shrieks from somewhere outside.

"Bernie has fallen from a tree," one of the girls came running to report. Fear was in her eyes. I rushed out - there he lay on the cement, a broken branch beside him. He was merely whimpering now, but whenever we wanted to touch him, he screamed again with pain.

Oh, why does this have to happen? And why just at a time when Paul is away? No, Inge, I told myself, don't be rebellious and bitter. And as I stood there, looking up at the high Eucalyptus tree from which Bernhard had fallen, at least 20 feet down to the cement, I just thanked the Lord that he was still alive, that he had not fallen on his head nor on his back, but on his bottom.

What now? While one of our helpers pedalled off to get help from the Institute center, the rest of us jointly carried him inside, in spite of his heartbreaking cries.

"Mummy," he said later, "I threw my ball over the roof and it did not come down so I wanted to try to find it. I assure you that I selected only the big branches and I don't know why it broke," he added as explanation, for we had always told him that if he must climb trees, he should at least be sensible enough to choose the thickest branches. He did not know, nor had we realized ourselves, that Eucalyptus branches break very easily indeed...

How relieved I was when I heard Marianne's car. She was our center hostess and a nurse by profession - someone with whom I could share the responsibility and decisions. While I put the sad girls to bed, she went away to some friends who had a telephone to phone the hospital. Would there be a doctor on night duty, and could we bring an emergency? Yes, we could bring him.

This time we carried Bernhard on top of his mattress and put him into the back of the car so that he would feel less pain.. I was glad that the hospital was already alerted. A nurse was waiting with a stretcher. The doctor looked at him briefly and then apologized that he could not say anything before an X-ray was taken. But no radiologist was around at night, so he could not do anything else but give him a strong sedative and leave him on the stretcher...

The X-ray the next day revealed a broken femur. I was able to stay with Bernie as they put him in a bed on traction and overheard the explanation of the orthopedic specialist who was just visiting the hospital that day! Bernie would have to be operated on as quickly as possible and screws inserted to hold the two pieces of bone together. However ... they had no such screws at present, but would have to get them from another hospital! As it was Saturday, the next radio contact would be on Monday morning; the plane could bring the screws that same day, and Bernie could be operated on on Tuesday morning...

No matter how I calculated the days, I had to face the fact that Paul would only be returning on Wednesday - one day after the operation.. There was no way to communicate with him either by telephone or by telegram. There was, however, one way of communication always open to us: prayer to our heavenly Father. So I asked Him to communicate somehow to Paul that he was desperately needed here by Monday evening, not only for my sake, but also for reassuring a certain lad in hospital. I hardly dared to believe it. But as Paul actually walked through the door on Monday evening, I threw my arms around his neck crying with thankfulness. We went straight to the hospital and it was good to hear the doctor once more explain the plans for the operation. He asked Paul to give a pint of his own blood (just in case) and asked us both to stay in the anteroom and pray.

The operation went well, except that in the middle of it, the surgeon came out, asking for special prayer as the X-ray machine had broken down and had to be

repaired first... Bernie was in great pain for the first days, but the Lord sent him a special gift in the form of a delightful old gentleman in the adjacent room. This man, a Christian businessman from Canada who was recuperating after a minor accident, had no visiting hours to observe and could often visit Bernie during the day, joking and talking, cheering him up, and, above all, praying with him and for him. For even then, the doctor could only assure us of a 50% chance that the femur head would be adequately nourished with blood and not die off.



our two sons on crutches !

The time of convalescence was hard for such an active boy as Bernhard: five weeks in hospital, three weeks in bed at home, two months in a wheelchair (during which time he could go back to school), and another two months on crutches. It was a sight to behold, when our two sons on crutches, John Ovuoba and Bernie, went for a little walk together in the garden of Lingua House!

* * *

We were not the only ones in our community at Lingua House who had sorrows. The death of John Ovuoba's father occurred at that time and was a heavy blow. The first baby of our faithful Izi typist, Emmanuel, and his wife, Angelina,

was born with an incurable jaundice. Surgery revealed a congenital birth defect which caused her death at three months of age.

These setbacks and sufferings brought us closer together, at least with some. With others, we had a harder time understanding and accepting one another with our cultural differences and in varying stages of spiritual growth.

There was in particular Daniel, with whom we had clashes now and then. He was the Ezaa co-translator, a very talented young man, and especially gifted for the work of translation. Paul liked to work with him, because in some ways the two were similar: impulsive, flexible, imaginative, always ready to try something new. Daniel had a tremendous command of idiomatic expressions in his own language. For years we had prayed for a second co-translator for Ezaa, we had searched, and even trained some men in translation principles - yet found no one else. Fortunately he was a speedy worker, but whereas the others could also launch

into post-literacy material, Old Testament Bible stories, and even cassette work, he had little time for anything other than the New Testament translation. It was specially helpful for Paul that Daniel usually did not mind his own drafts being worked over, criticized and torn to pieces. Paul could not have done this with the other translators, because they identified too much with their own work, whereas Daniel was detached enough not to take corrections and alterations of his text as a personal offence. In fact he was eager to find better solutions and idioms.

But some of his other characteristics were less commendable. At times he was careless, forgetful, and sometimes arrogant and demanding. And of these traits, he did not like to be reminded or corrected. Daniel was the one of whom the Pastor of the Presbyterian Ikwo/Ezaa church (who had suggested and chosen him as translator!) wrote after one of his clashes with the church itself: "...Daniel should remember that without our advice and encouragement he could have gone the way of Christopher (the one who had failed us all), for if he wants to gain everything now and lose nothing for Christ, he may not stay in the work for long. We will not accept a Bible translated by a proud and selfish young man. Humility and a Spirit-filled life is our prayer for you all in this work..."

For just this reason too, we wanted to find a second translator so that the Ezaa New Testament would not become one man's work which people might reject by pointing out the negative aspects of this one man. The Lord had not shown us a second one, but we could really point out to the church that the Ezaa translation was not Daniel's translation, but the product of a whole team. In addition, many villagers had helped to coin expressions.

But nevertheless Daniel remained a real concern for us. Time and again he wanted more money, more free time, more privileges and less obligations, more enjoyment and less responsibilities. What hurt us most was that he often incited the others to the same behavior, to discontent and what appeared to us as covert and overt rebellion. We kept praying for him, knowing that the Lord himself had to deal with him. Surely it would be very strange if a professing Christian could work on God's Word and yet remain unaffected by His spirit.

Daniel's hour of crisis came at last, very late, when most of the translation was ready to be typed on stencils, in September 1975. There had been another argument but it did not take him long to realize his mistake. He immediately wrote Paul the following letter:

"I am very sorry about this afternoon's incident. In fact, my heart has wandered without really settling. I am asking for forgiveness. I have realized that I should have taken time to explain things to you, but failed in this aspect. I have had a guilty conscience since then. Please pardon me. Pardon me also for my failure to satisfy you with our work on Revelation in particular. I think it is your duty in the Lord to mould our characters and therefore you are right to use any method to prune us. Pray for us, and for me in particular..."

But the Lord had to deal with him on a yet deeper level. About a week later he fell sick - but let's hear Daniel telling the experience in his own words:

"The story below is told by me, Daniel Eze, who had a tough encounter with the Lord, 1st October 1975. Before I continue I must say a word of thanks to Mr Samuel Iyoku who had always emphasized to me the need to be born again. Above all I thank Mr and Mrs Meier who have always prayed for me. It should be recalled that on the 29th September, Mr. Meier laid his hands on me and prayed to God to forgive me and give me strength again.

"Throughout the afternoon, I was thinking about something. I got annoyed with almost everybody. In the night of the 30th, I could not sleep. Terrible things, all sorts of spirits and all kinds of horrible old crooked men and women filled my thoughts. They so frightened me that I nearly cried out. I had to go to my office where I opened my Bible. Some of these spirits ran away, but some were not to be driven away. I got up and went over to Justin's room. I was there reading with him, but my heart was all the time restless, and he noticed it, too.

"Soon I left him and went to my bed again. The horrible spirits gathered all around me again, singing all kinds of evil songs. All this time I was sweating profusely while the whole of my body was trembling. I did not dare wake anybody. For the first time, that night I remembered that God made available the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ for our every need. So I started calling upon Jesus and the blood of Jesus and most of these small creatures fled at every mention of Jesus or the blood of Jesus, only to come back after a while. This continued until midnight, when my bed could not contain me any longer, for there were rather too many creatures. I left the bed and lay on the ground for some minutes. I got up again and told God with force that He should spare my life, for the sake of the work I am doing for Him, but could take it afterwards. As a sign I prayed that I should fall asleep before 1 am. I also prayed that God might forgive my sins, because they lay naked before me and my God. I cannot remember when I fell asleep. All I know is that I was not awake at 1 am.

"By about 20 minutes to 2, I was awakened by more horrible things which defy description. This time I could no longer bear it alone, so I woke Paul Anyigo, an Ezaa friend who was visiting. First of all I told him about all the sins of my life, how I had deceived people, how I had been an adulterous fellow, how I had distrusted and blasphemed God, how I had not tried to unite the church factions in my hometown Idembia, how I had sometimes talked to the master of our work as if he were a boy of my own age. I really wept, and Paul Anyigo prayed and wept with me. After about an hour's prayer we got up and read John 14, prayed again, and before the end of this prayer, Daniel Eze had become a child of God in the real sense. My heart was filled with joy. I was assured of my salvation and that I was a new man in God. I told God that whatever He wanted me to do for Him, I would willingly do it to ensure that the Ezaa people see what I have seen. I am ready to serve Him in Ezaa with my talent, time and money - 'Here am I, send me'.

"Last night I started thinking deeply about the translation work, the problems and how to face them. One of those problems is the question of establishing and continuing literacy classes. I see the need for Old Testament translation also. I remember how a woman once insisted during the church service that I should read the OT passage in Ezaa (and not in Ibo as the evangelist usually does). Pray!"

Our rejoicing over this change in Daniel's life was great, especially as we felt that the Lord was preparing for Himself a leader for the future follow-up work in Ezaa.

The 1st of January 1976 became one of our red letter days: the text of the Izi New Testament was finished in its final revised form!

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Daniel, a new man !

In the midst of patiently plodding along, news like a bombshell exploded into our "Institute of Linguistics" group. It was one evening in March when we had all just gathered on our center for a time of prayer and sharing. The telephone rang and the director was called. Before we could start to pray we had to face the news that the government wanted us to hand over our work into Nigerian hands and that we all had to leave the country at the end of April!

This request did not come completely unexpectedly. Our group had not been able to get visas for new members for several years, and the concept of 'Nigerianization' had been the cry to all foreigners for a long time. The missions had been preparing to hand over all the hospitals to the government. Their mission schools had been 'nigerianized' long before that. Our group, too, had been concerned about getting together a circle of our friends and Christian leaders. At our last conference a year earlier, we had assigned our Assistant Director, Dr. Ron Stanford, to give his entire time toward the goal of having a number of Nigerian friends forming a national organization to continue with the Nigerian needs of Bible translation projects, if ever we were asked to leave the country.

We had indeed, from the first day in Nigeria, sought to train Nigerians. Could we have done more? Had we not been seriously enough in trying to involve Nigerians? Yes, we had tried. We personally had even presented the work of translation to the Christian students of Zaria University. Paul had also launched a series of radio broadcasts for ELWA. We had had no response. The time did not seem to have come. It seemed that God would have to remove us first from the

scene, before our Nigerian friends would see their responsibility. They had been used to the presence of missionaries for all their lives.

What really caught us by surprise, was the shortness of time. Just a few weeks! And we had counted on slowly handing over the work, spreading the process over several years! Why, we had not even got to the point of forming the national organization yet!

Finally, the government conceded that our departure could be delayed two more months, until the end of June. Another concession was that two of our teams could stay on for two more years in order to bridge the gap and hold training courses. But they would work from the city only, and not be allowed to live in their village locations.

Our own team-mates were dumbfounded and could not understand the politics of their own government. Although they expected to be relieved of their present work sooner or later that year, for them also the shock was too sudden. Now it really meant getting down to it as never before. They willingly agreed to work 9 1/2 hours a day instead of the usual 7, so that all the N.T. books could be typed on stencils and be duplicated in time. Typing, proofreading, correcting, duplicating - each one had his own task.

In between there was much discussing and planning for the future: Samuel would continue his Bible school training and become a pastor in his church; Justin had his architectural studies to finish; Daniel wanted to get a job as a primary school teacher in Ezaa and at the same time promote literacy there; Thomas desired to try and get a job in Jos and take up studies in business administration; Elias had the dream of further training to become a teacher and run a bookshop besides; and the typists would try to get secretarial jobs anywhere.

But what about John? How could he earn his living? What was the Lord's plan for his life? How could he get more training? Where could he make his home?

It was quite clear to Paul and myself that the Lord did not mean him to go into any kind of secular profession, but that He wanted him in some way permanently connected with the translation work and the cassette ministry. But a number of further decisions would depend on the new national organization which our administration sought to establish.



John Ovuoba working on the Ikwo translation in Lingua House, Jos

In this, we watched with amazement and deep gratitude how the Lord was working. Longstanding friends, whose commitment had never gone beyond a very general interest in our work, suddenly stood up for us, ready to identify with our cause, ready to give valuable counsel and time, ready to commit themselves and form an organization of their own.

Thus the "Nigerian Bible Translation Trust" was founded, as the fruit of Dr. John Bendor-Samuel's foresight and vision. Years back he had made sure that the "Institute of Linguistics" had a legal basis in the country. The "Institute of Linguistics Trust" had been registered with us expatriates as members and trustees. Now we just had to replace our Executive Committee and a general membership with Nigerian citizens, about 30 in all. It was to this legal body that our lovely center with nearly a dozen buildings - only two years old - would be handed over as headquarters and initial financial asset.

Gradually the plans for John's future began to take shape. He would aim to get a solid Bible training in one of the Nigerian Theological Seminaries with a view to later translation work either in his own language (Old Testament!), or in another Nigerian language (as consultant). But in order to be accepted there, he would first have to study hard on his own, and take some general education exams, as he had missed three years of secondary schooling. In the meantime, he would be able to live at the center, and build up a small cassette ministry. The Lord laid it on Paul's heart to leave him all our cassette equipment, including a cassette duplicator, so that he would have a good start, and some day even be able to make a living from it. He would also be in charge of recording all of the Izi, Ikwo and Ezaa New Testaments, duplicating them onto cassettes and supervising their distribution among the churches. Hadn't the Lord prepared him for this?

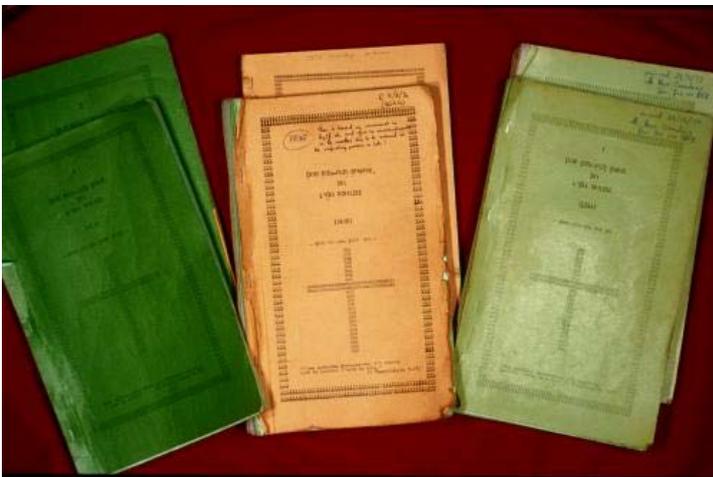
We felt completely at rest when we got letters from Switzerland telling us that some friends felt led to support John financially, yes, even through his entire Bible school training time. What an assurance for John of the goodness of the Lord!

In the middle of our final spurt, I myself had a hard time chasing away my doubts concerning the goodness of the Lord. Why was He doing this to us, disrupting the children's schooling at such an awkward time? A few years earlier, yes, I would have been ready to move to another country, at a time when the children were not yet in school. But why now? Hadn't we already made a big sacrifice in letting the children have their education in English instead of our own German language? Why was He sending us back to Switzerland now and inflicting upon our children such a change in their language of instruction and their school system? Weren't they already complaining every day, saying:

"Mummy and Daddy, please, we don't want to go to Swiss schools, the teachers are so severe and all the children will laugh at us because we can't write German properly!"

We had no answers, knew no solutions. But we knew from His past dealings with us in our lives, that the saying was absolutely true: that God never takes something from us without giving us something else, something even better. But could there be a school better than Hillcrest? Impossible! Yes, maybe not something better in my eyes, but certainly in His eyes! Just now my lesson was to trust Him completely, blindly and joyfully, knowing that we would taste the goodness of the Lord.

Fortunately there was not much time to dream about our own future. Just now we had only one goal: to finish the duplicated New Testament in Izi, Ikwo and Ezaa! Would our strength, and that of our co-workers, hold out? Would the duplicator continue to work well? Could we sell enough of our household equipment, car, etc., in order to pay for all the paper and printing, the tickets and air freight, in order to leave the country without any debts?



The finished manuscripts of the New Testaments in Izi, Ikwo and Ezaa

On June 25th, two days before our departure, Paul returned from the binders with a car stacked full of books. What a thrill for all of us to hold these volumes in our hands at last! Each New Testament consisted of two volumes as it would have been impossible to bind so many duplicated sheets into one. How proud our co-workers looked as they leafed through the multi-colored volumes, each gospel and letter printed in different colors. There were 50 copies each in Ikwo and Ezaa, and 200 copies in Izi. They were destined for existing churches and prayer

groups for further testing and feedback. It was also a parting gift to our translators (with 2000 primers in each language as well), as it was now up to their initiative to sell those books, create interest and spread the news of the forthcoming printed New Testaments.

The following day our team-mates left. The farewell was too quick to hurt much. Of our "Institute of Linguistics" group many had already left the country, the few who remained accompanied us a day later to the airport. We waved until we saw the people like tiny specks, then sat back in our seats, exhausted, weak. Fortunately the children were too excited to notice our tiredness.

"Where will we sleep tonight?"

"We don't know. But your grandparents and aunties will surely have made beds ready for you somewhere!"

To many other of their "where" and "when" questions we had to answer "we don't know". They didn't think it strange - they were secure in their trust in us, and they knew that in the same way we trusted our heavenly Father.

The final sprint had taken all of our strength, yes, but it had been worth it. We had reached the goal - just in time!

"Thank you, Lord, that you always pushed us along, nudged us to work faster and harder, and taught us not to waste precious time. Thank you for those six priceless books in Paul's hand-luggage. Thank you for each one of those who had a part in this work. Let their hopes and prayers be fulfilled: that one day three shipments of printed New Testaments will reach the Izi, Ikwo and Ezaa people."