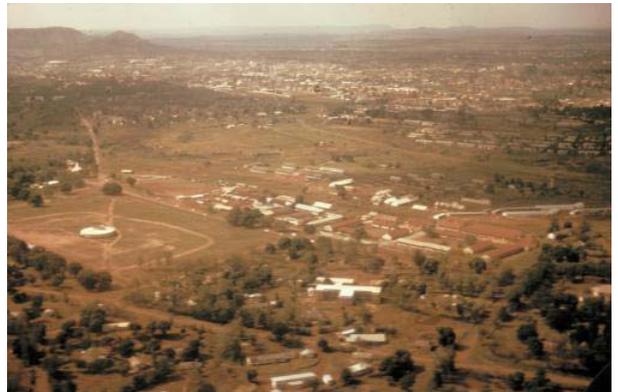


Chapter 1

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

"Would you mind, Inge, giving us a 'monolingual demonstration' to top off our Open Day?" our director, Dr. John Bendor-Samuel, had asked me with a smile in our staff meeting. The Open Day was supposed to become the highlight of our 'Introductory Linguistics Course'. It was the first one for Nigerians which our organization, the Institute of Linguistics, was holding in Enugu, the capital of Eastern Nigeria. Everybody who had a name and rank in Enugu had been invited to this Open Day, for with this course the work of our Institute of Linguistics would have its beginning in the country. Today, January 11, was this Red Letter Day.



Enugu, nestled between hills

Slowly I walked through the fields on the University campus, towards the white three-story blocks which housed the lecture-rooms and study-halls. My feet felt like lead and I had a lump in my throat. I always dreaded performing in front of an audience, and now, being so obviously pregnant made matters even worse.

The midday sun was beating down mercilessly. I looked around for a shady place to rest - I was a bit too early - and found a few steps leading to a building. There I sat down and started thinking.

Was it really only two weeks ago that we had arrived in Nigeria? Indeed. My thoughts flew back to the past events. It was Christmas Eve when we stood sweating in Lagos Airport. Christmas Carols were blaring out of the loudspeakers while we moved slowly through customs and immigration procedures. It did not seem to us like Christmas because we had not flown in from snow-white Europe, but from Ghana! We had already been rocked over the ocean for four weeks in a freighter when our captain announced to us in Ghana that the voyage to Nigeria would take another four weeks! What else could we do but leave the ship in Ghana and continue by air?

A taxi had brought us to the guesthouse of the Sudan Interior Mission, the only address in Lagos we had.

"I feel like Mary and Joseph on that first Christmas," I had said to Paul, my husband. For we, too, were expecting our first son and did not know anybody in town. Yet for us the Lord had prepared not a stable with straw, but a proper, soft bed, running water and clean food. How thankful we were!

Two days later we were able to fly to Enugu and join the staff on the course. They were old friends whom we had already met in Britain, some at the Summer School of Linguistics and others at the Bible Training Institute in Glasgow. All of them had also just arrived prior to the course. Earlier on, Dr. Bendor-Samuel had been able to sign an agreement with the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, issuing us an invitation to start linguistic and Bible translation work in Nigeria. As a sign that we really meant to train Nigerians from the very start, we had offered this Introductory Course in Linguistics on the Enugu Campus. About 20 young men had enrolled. A few of them were University students, others had been sent by various missions engaged in translation work, wanting their helpers to become better equipped in linguistics.

My thoughts and memories were interrupted by a line of cars coming up the long driveway from the University gate.

"I had better be going too," I thought, "for I have yet to find my materials for the demonstration!"

I picked up three small stones, selected three bigger ones, looked for some sticks of various lengths and chose a few leaves from nearby bushes, large ones and small ones - all items which I knew my informant would easily recognize and be able to give me the names of in his own language. For the climax of the demonstration I had a bunch of bananas ready in my bag!

I just slipped in through the side door before the meeting started - what a surprise: the hall was packed full, about 350 people! Representatives of the Government had come, staff of the University, the press and radio, as well as many students and interested friends.

The Governor of Eastern Nigeria, Sir Francis Ibiam, was the Chairman. He expressed his gratefulness about this course and said: "I believe that the Bible is a book which everybody should be able to read, and not only read, but also understand. And not only understand, but he should also live according to it."

Dr. John Bendor-Samuel, Director of the Course and the whole work of the Institute of Linguistics in Africa, presented our three-fold program of linguistics, literacy and Bible translation. He hoped that within a few years we would have 20 translation teams in 20 Nigerian languages. These teams would be able to speak these languages, and would write grammars, orthographies and dictionaries. Further, they would make recordings of folk tales, songs and customs of the people, all of which would be tremendously useful for the 'College of African Studies'. The aim: to make every Nigerian literate in his own mother tongue. His following words made me alert:

"In our kind of work it is not possible to make a quick investigation and then disappear again. We estimate that each team will take about 15 years. There is no other way." How often these words would ring in our ears later on...

My own so much dreaded monolingual demonstration turned out to be fun! "Thank you, Lord, for giving me that bright Yala student as a partner!"

I was speaking my own mother tongue, Swiss-German, and he was using Yala, a language of Eastern Nigeria, both of them languages the audience did not understand! My task was to 'learn' some of his language, just by using my own language and my hands and feet!

He guessed easily what I wanted. In quick succession I was able to draw out of him the names for stone, stick, leaf, singulars and plurals, numbers one to three, the adjectives small, long and big, verbs like breaking, falling, etc. I wrote everything in phonetic symbols on the blackboard and explained to the audience what grammatical conclusions could be deduced. The hilarity of the watching crowd reached a climax as I tried to elicit the subject pronouns - 'I eat', 'you eat', 'we eat' - by offering him a banana to eat and eating one myself!

The Governor closed the Open Day with some humorous examples from his own language, Ibo, and expressed his desire that the work of the Institute should go on forever. The Dean of the Department of Philosophy had already used similar words. Even though we knew that words of men are easily spoken, we recognized that the doors in Nigeria were wide open to us.

Twenty teams were needed, Dr. Bendor-Samuel had said, for twenty Nigerian languages. Yet there remained still 400 unreached languages in Nigeria! And each team needs to work about 15 years in each language. Whenever will this vast task be finished? "There is no other way," he had concluded.

"Lord, is there really no other way? We are only four teams who are ready to start! Don't you have another, better way? A way to speed up the tremendous task?"

God had indeed planned a better way and He taught it to us patiently over the next 12 years... He taught it to us through mistakes and encouragements, by closing some doors and opening others, even through war and expulsion from the country. But He brought us where He wanted us. The Nigerians themselves would become the translators and we, the expatriates, the "translation helpers", by training, advising and leading them through their work. Not the other way round.

During one of the first evenings, Paul had a discussion with some Nigerian students and challenged them with Bible translation work. Their unanimous answer, however, was: "When our country has developed enough economically, we too will have the money to do this kind of work."

Paul tried in vain to get it across to them that, while money is needed, it is not the decisive factor. What counts is willingness to obey Christ's call and leading. The question of money and development is primarily a convenient excuse.

And a second thing the Lord taught us in all those years - although the need is so great and so pressing, God is in no hurry at all. He has time to wait until we have learned our lessons, until each man or woman among us is ready to listen and to fall in step with His plans.

* * *

The one burning question in our heart kept returning: who and where were the people whose language we should learn?

How my heart was pounding as one day our director called us to his office. He told us about two language groups and asked us to pray for God's leading, weighing up all the pros and cons and listening to that still small voice of the Lord.

The first group he mentioned were the Izi (pronounced: eeZEE) people, a group of about 200,000, with a language related to Ibo, only 50 miles away from our headquarters, but a people so impenetrable and so unresponsive to any influence from outside, that no mission or church effort had been successful. Even Government officials considered them the most backward group in a large area.

The second group presented to us were the Ijaws. They lived in the very south, where the river Niger had formed a large delta, an area abounding in rivers and streams, covered by dense jungle. The climate would be trying, humid and hot. But there were Christians there, and a church wanting the Word of God in their own language.

Now the choice was ours. What a relief that we did not have to decide in a few hours or even days. In the following weeks we would have enough time to pray and seek an answer for what, to us and to our praying friends, had been a burning question ever since we left Switzerland.

In a few days we would travel to Ghana with our fellow workers, for we still had to participate in the Orientation Course, obligatory for all new members going to work in Africa. Only after four months would we return to Nigeria, because the arrival of our baby would also fall into this period.

* * *

Coming back from Ghana, Paul and I carried one more piece of precious luggage between us: a locally made basket with a lively baby in it! God had indeed given us the promised son, and we gave him the name we had decided on on our Wedding Day two years before: Bernhard, meaning 'strong as a bear (for the Lord!)', dedicated to Him at his conception and re-dedicated at his birth, a birth that was so obviously planned and prepared by God.

Three days before the calculated date, there in Ghana, we had unexpectedly received a visit from a Swiss lady friend, a teacher at a women's college about 300 miles north of Accra. She told us about a beautifully situated hospital there, staffed by a Swiss doctor and Swiss nurses, and suggested that I go there immediately.

I was so relieved at the thought of having the baby in a mission hospital instead of in a government one! Quickly we packed a suitcase, rented the car of our Ghana branch and were off. Gill Jacobs, a translator in Ghana, and our friends Klaus and Janice Spreda accompanied us.

The laterite road was bumpy, and the African traffic not without hazards, so how glad we were when at sunset the peaceful hospital grounds came into sight.

But we had rejoiced too early. The guesthouse was absolutely full and even mentioning the name of our teacher friend did not help. What now? The kind hostess could not, however, turn away the pregnant woman and the sick translator lady; she would find room somewhere. But the others had to return the long way to Accra that night...

My heart ached. I had taken it for granted that Paul would be with me at the time of the birth. Against hope I would continue to pray for that.

Two days later the baby announced its wish to be born.

"Could I use the telephone to contact my husband?" I asked the hostess.

"Sure", she replied, "but I must warn you that the line is often bad and we haven't been able to get through to Accra lately."

I tried to dial the number in Accra many times. In vain. I knew now that it would take a miracle to bring Paul to my side. As the labour pains increased and I had to go back to my room and lie down, my friend, Gill, took over at the telephone. She shared that tenacious faith which doesn't give up and tried the same number countless times. After three hours her perseverance was rewarded, the bell rang at the other end and a voice answered. There was, however, only the Ghanaian houseboy of the director's family to take the message, and we couldn't be sure how well he had understood it and how he would pass it on. Once more I had to leave the matter in the Lord's hands. But as it turned out, the boy had correctly understood the two most important words: "Paul" and "baby"! With that significant information, our Director was able to contact Paul. He lost no time in jumping into the next bush taxi heading north. Late that very day he was at my side and the following day our petition was granted: to share in the toil and joy over our son Bernhard.

That evening - the baby lay in the tiny cot beside my bed - I continued to read Isaiah and one verse just leaped out at me. I knew God was speaking to me personally:

"Ask me about the things to come and you shall commit to me my sons and the work of my hands" (Is. 40:11)



In Agogo, Ghana, with my friend holding newborn Bernhard

I knew in my heart what the Lord wanted to get through to me: Bernhard was now His and there should never be any room in us for worry - worry about his adjustment to the people we came to serve, worry about his schooling in a different country and language... He would take care of everything. What a relief for us! Lord, do remind us about Your promise if a time comes when we forget!

The end of May found us back in Enugu again. While we were away, the new Nigeria Branch of the Institute of Linguistics had been founded. Our new director, Jack Henderson, and his wife had been able to rent some apartments which would serve for several years as our headquarters.

Several weeks had passed since our return, but as I remembered all this, sitting alone in our room in Enugu, I suddenly realized that Bernhard had not been given to us alone to enjoy, but he would be an instrument to win the love and friendship of those disdained Izi people. Indeed, the decision had already been made - we would go to that closed and unresponsive group, the Izis, as the other possibility was no longer open. Maybe right at this very moment the question about where we should live would be settled, for Paul had travelled to Abakaliki that morning to attend a Council Meeting of Izi chiefs and Government officials. I could hardly wait for him to arrive back in the evening.

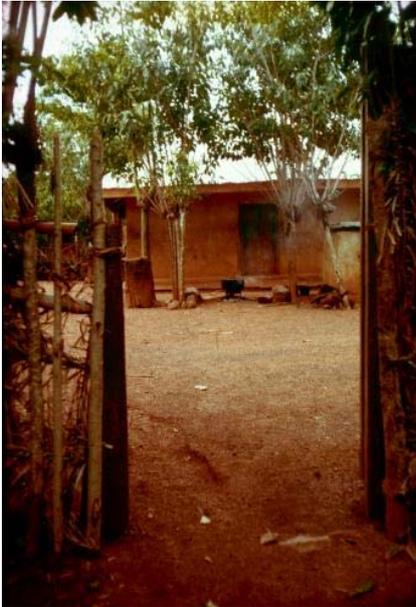
"Oh, Inge, I really think the Lord guided us and prevented us from making a mistake!" Paul told me when he got home. "There were 10 Izi chiefs and all were keen to have their language written. Three of the chiefs wanted to have us live right in their own compounds, for reasons of prestige, I guess. One lives too deep in the bush; as for the second, I heard just in time that he has been in prison recently for murder, and that by sheltering white people, he would be trying to rehabilitate himself. So we have decided to accept the third one's offer."

"Where does he live?" I inquired a bit anxiously.

"You drive 9 miles south of the town and then two miles into the bush. Unfortunately there are rivers blocking the way to his compound on two sides, but we will try to bridge one with planks so that we can drive right to the house.

Mbamu Nwode is the name of the old chief and he seems to have strict authority over everybody else. He is the chief over the motherland of Ebya where all the Izis originated. I believe it is the Lord's leading that we should live right in the heart of Iziland."

"Where does he think we could live? In his compound?"



Entrance to chief's compound

"Yes. His compound is rectangular, about as big as two tennis courts. Right in the middle stands a small cement house, about 6 yards square. Behind the house is his corral, fenced around with trees, and further behind is his yam barn where he is storing yams. You know, a cement house, cows and yams, these are all signs of wealth and they must be kept in the middle of the compound for protection. Then, toward the outside fence are the wives' huts, about seven of them, nicely arranged in a circle. First he offered us half of his house, and thought of living in the other half himself. But I insisted that we would need the whole house. It is so small anyway! After some discussion he agreed to move into one of his wives' huts."

"And what about the water? Will we have to get it from the rivers?"

"That's another problem. But as the rains have started now and the house has an aluminum roof, I would like to buy a water tank and fix up some gutters."

How we praised God that evening. We were sure that He would continue to go ahead of us and prepare the way. Had we not studied together on the ship the story of the Exodus from Egypt and the entrance into the Promised Land of Israel? Had we not remembered His faithfulness there, His miracles and leadings? He was the same today. We claimed afresh His promise that the Land under every step we trod would be ours and that the compound of Mbamu Nwode would become the bridgehead from which we would conquer territory for Him.



A road in Abaliki

The next weeks were filled with preparations. We bought wood planks and nails, water tank and pipes, chairs and a bicycle, a stove and a toilet bucket, tinned

food and staples for four months, soap powder and pens, and whatever we thought we would need...

Amidst these preparations came the great day when I was allowed to accompany Paul and our friend Klaus Spreda to our new home. They wanted to build the bridge over the smaller of the rivers, fix the gutters, and make a cement stand for the water tank. As we reached the small town of Abakaliki, my excitement grew. This was the town where Paul would have to go and get our mail and occasionally do some shopping. A pleasant African town at the foot of a conical hill, rows of one-story houses with a lovely green section for the government houses.

On we went, right through Iziland. But as much as I looked, I saw no villages anywhere.

"I told you that the Izi people do not live in villages, but in widely scattered compounds," Paul reminded me. "A few yards yet and we will turn off the main road, then you might see something."

The car was now on the narrow bush path and pressed the high grass down on either side. I could make out some entrances to fenced compounds. Children came running towards the car, laughing and shouting and pursuing us. There was the river. Paul and Klaus unloaded the planks - with the help of some curious onlookers - and it was not too long before we could continue the last few hundred yards to the chief's compound.



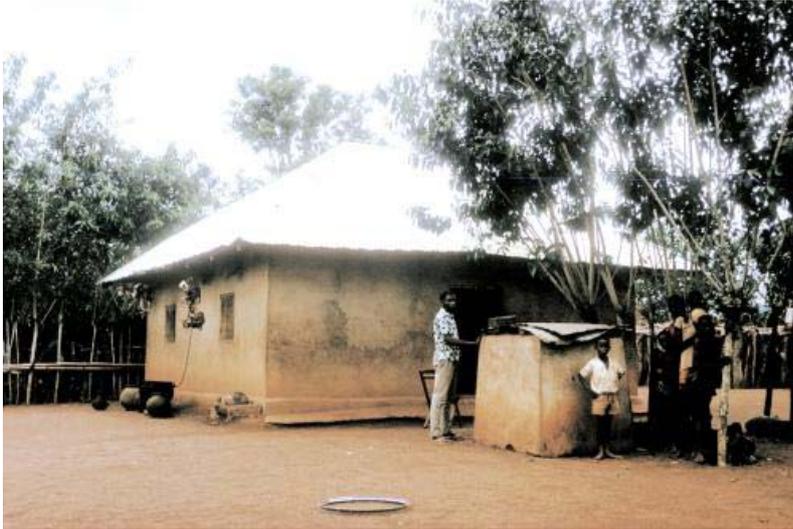
With a thumping heart, and full of apprehension, I stepped out of the car. While Paul and Klaus worked on the gutters, I carried Bernhard from hut to hut, greeted the chief and each of his wives with their children, all barely clothed. What astonished shouting and joyful gesticulating was caused by the white baby!

And then we entered 'our' house. The entrance was so small we had to stoop. Coming from the bright sunlight outside, our eyes had to get accustomed to the dark first. Only two tiny windows let in some daylight. I fought back the tears, but they rolled down my cheeks against my will.

"Oh Paul, do you really think we can live here? This looks more like a stable! How can Bernhard grow up here?"

"I agree, darling," said Paul reassuringly, " but once the chief has removed his things, we will clean it and whitewash the walls and then it will look much brighter.

And besides, didn't the Lord lead us here and hadn't He himself started His childhood in a stable?"



the chief's house at our first visit, notice the animal bones under the roof on the left side of the house

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accepted; from others he encountered rejection or even enmity. The work on the house had been progressing, with much sweat and thirst. One day he arrived there to find that the rain had washed those newly built toilet walls away again.. Paul wrote to our praying friends back home:

"Yes, we stretch out our hands, even when we are led where we would rather not go. For us, it will be in two days' time. Inge, Bernhard and I, with the Lord, we four, will live among the Izi people and will report to you faithfully what God is doing. What a privilege to go out with the living God, to the place where HE wants to be but so far has never found a way to enter."

The VW van stood in front of our group house in Enugu, piled high with drums, household goods and furniture parts. Director Jack Henderson called everybody together and while we stood around the car, he committed us to the Lord and sent us out in His name.

It looked as if a storm was brewing as we slowly approached Abakaliki, avoiding the many potholes in the road. We asked the Lord to keep the rain back and He did. It was afternoon as we drove over the last bits of bush paths - thankful that the little streams we had to cross were still dry. Then the newly laid bridge - yes, it was still there and the water only ankle deep. But would the heavy car make it up the steep



embankment on the other side?

I got out with Bernhard and watched the car crawl slowly over the bridge and then up. But oh, now the wheels started to spin and the car rolled back... What should we do? But the sound of the engine had announced our arrival and from all sides men and women ran out of their compounds which lay hidden behind trees and high grass. About 30 of them put their weight against the car and - yes, slowly, slowly it made it up the hill.

As we drove into chief Mbamu's compound everybody rushed out of the huts. The old man greeted us with a loud voice and many words which, of course, we did not yet understand. One of his younger sons, Ukwa, who had been at primary school for six years, interpreted for him. He had already been chosen by his father to teach us his language.



We unloaded as fast as we could and as dusk settled in, our colleague Klaus Spreda turned the car around. He still had to drive back to Enugu. We had at least had time to move everything inside the door, even to screw the beds together and light a kerosene lantern.

One thing worried us, however. There was no water in the water tank. Could it be that it had not rained for the last days? "Lord, we are dependent on YOUR water now!" The Lord answered. A couple of hours later a gush of wind announced the coming rain. Then with one blow, the rain thundered down on the roof so that we could no longer hear each other.

"Inge," shouted Paul as he peeped out the door, "the gutters are leaking and not one drop is going into the tank!" So that was the reason for the empty tank!

"Where did we pack the putty?" And while the rain poured down on him, Paul managed to fix the leakage and then we heard with great relief the water thundering into the empty tank.

Deeply grateful, we lay on our hard bush beds that evening. God had answered our prayer for material water so quickly, wasn't this like a pledge that He would also answer our prayer for the spiritual, living water to be poured down into the dry and parched hearts of the Izi people?