

## Chapter 4

### RETREAT TO ABAKALIKI

"I see that you have many things," Echiegu said as he watched us packing the day before our move.

"We have ordered a truck which should be waiting for us on the other side of the bamboo bridge early in the morning."

"I want to help you," he said, "I will send all my wives and my older sons to carry your things across the water."

"Thank you, Echiegu, but we don't think it will be necessary. We've already asked the people here in the compound to help us. Surely you have other work to do for your family." But Echiegu insisted.

As daylight broke the following morning, we were ready for the carriers. We opened the door and peeped out. The compound was deserted. We called for Ukwa.

"Ukwa, where are the people who wanted to help us?"

Ukwa squirmed, obviously embarrassed.

"Since that day when you told us that you wanted to leave, Nwuguru has become my enemy," he confessed. "Now he does not allow anybody in the family to help you. But myself and Ogbona, and also our two mothers, we will give you a hand."

We were stunned. But if men wanted to let us down, the Lord surely wouldn't. How good that Echiegu had offered his help. Oh Lord, do not let him forget his promise!



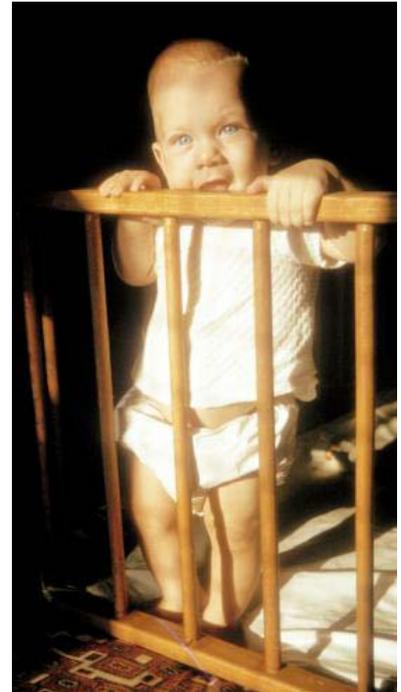
*carrying the heavy watertank across the  
river*

Here they came already, entering the compound in single file: six women, several young men, and many children. Quickly they moved amid the barrels, boxes, boards, buckets and chairs, and distributed the loads. Part had to be carried through the river, only the lighter pieces could be taken over the shaky bamboo bridge. Suddenly even Ogbaga appeared, the banished wife of the chief! What a happy surprise! Her foot had healed, she was strong again, and

she even helped lift the heavy water tank, steadying it with twenty other people through the river.

Before noon, everything had been loaded onto the truck, and we were off, turning the page of a new chapter. We were leaving behind not only friends, but also - something totally new to us - foes. How could we win them back? Would they follow our invitation and visit us?

The rented apartment in Abakaliki proved to be what we had hoped for: a place of refuge, with few social obligations, quietness to prepare for a first linguistic workshop. At last we each had a work table. We placed them next to each other, and between us, like the leg of a T, a third table on which we put Bernhard's playpen. From this height he could easily watch Mummy and Daddy while playing with his toys or, when exhaustion from his beloved rocking exercises overtook him, he fell asleep right there.



*Bernhard's playpen  
on the table, Oct. '64*

How I enjoyed the luxuries of city life: running water, a shower and a flush toilet, electricity, and above all, someone who could take over some of the household chores for me. We had found an Izi boy of about 15 years, without father or mother, who could not finish his schooling for financial reasons, and was glad to get a job without first having to pay the usual bribe. George was not the brightest, and a little lazy, but he was faithful and good-humoured. He taught us lots of lessons of patience, like when he was sent to the Post

Office but had forgotten what he was supposed to do there, was sent to the market and bought tiny green tomatoes instead of big red ones, was told to wash the dishes and used the dishcloth to clean his bicycle first, was told to wash the diapers and instead entertained some 'school friends' in our living room. But he too had to learn patience in listening to us, to our mistakes, to our stammering endeavours to speak his language. It needed patience to be endlessly asked questions about the meaning of Izi words and phrases, to repeat again and again the same word or sentence, so that we could catch a particular sound or tone. He was the right man for our need.

We were grateful to find that the enmity of Chief Mbamu's family did not last long. By twos and threes the sons came, drawn irresistibly by that wondrous 'talking box' through which you could hear your dead father's voice so clearly that if you shut your eyes you would think he was right with you in the room!

Echiegu, too, visited us from time to time, to greet his special friend, Beniha (that is how the Izis transliterated the difficult name Bernhard), but above all to find out if we had decided yet about coming to live in his compound.

We had been praying daily about this decision for our future home. We weighed arguments against each other, we tested possibilities, cried to the Lord and waited for an answer. To accept Echiegu's offer would mean having no compound of our own, no private life, no playground for Bernhard, no place of quietness. Six wives and 20 children would live their life around ours from morning to night and in dry season even during the night. In addition, family in Africa includes friends and relatives, a circle many times larger than in our western society. We had had a taste of such living in Mbamu's compound; could we commit ourselves now for years? How were we going to bear this?

We searched for other alternatives - there was just not a single house to be rented in the whole of Iziland. We would have liked to build our own home. Yet we did not even have the money for a second-hand car, how much less for a house with the indispensable, expensive water reservoir.

By the time Echiegu came again and asked us to draw up an agreement which both parties would sign, we were sure God had decided for us. We had not chosen it. Once more we asked for a sign to confirm the guidance. We raised the conditions as high as we could: four years of free rent for an amount of \$ 1000 worth of building, a plot of free land of some 40 x 60 meters for the duration of 20 years. We wanted this land to plant some fruit trees and as a potential building site if God made it clear to us by the fourth year that we should build there. We expected to have to spend the remaining years of our lives in Izi in order to reach our goal.

On his next visit just before Christmas, Echiegu scribbled his signature in shaky letters (the only word he had learnt to write) on the document. He promised to have the house ready in March and we gave him the first installment money to buy cement and timber. Now that the decision was made, we rejoiced in confidence that the Lord would see us through.

By the time we left for the first workshop in January, we had been able to prepare a good part of our language material: a lexicon with about 1500 words on file slips, with sentences as examples of how these words are used, a grammar file with 900 sentences tentatively analysed, and dozens of lists of words sorted according to certain sounds or tone patterns.

The university town of Nsukka was known for a cool climate and proved to be an ideal place to hold a workshop. We especially enjoyed the fellowship with other linguists and translators from other Christian organisations. Unfortunately, Bernhard was the only child, and therefore had to take part in all the lectures! Happily he crawled around, tickling people's toes and practising pulling himself up on every chair!

We had been given the name of the very first Izi young man that had made it to the university and we were able to meet him here at Nsukka. He was excited

when he heard about our work and promised to invite Paul later on to speak to the Union of Secondary School Students back home in Abakaliki of which he was the President. From him, we learned that there are only 130 Izi boys in secondary education and 5 Izi girls! What a small ration from an ethnic group of 200,000 people! But it gave us fresh hope that among that "elite" surely the Lord would let us find one or two who could work with us later on!

Full of anticipation we returned to Abakaliki. How far might the construction of our house have progressed? A visit in mid-February thrilled us: the roofing was already being done! Surely by April we would be able to move!

It was not to come to that. He who tries to carry the light into the realm of darkness will be attacked. And God allowed our faith and our love for Him to be severely tested.

The middle of March had seen all the members of the Institute of Linguistics reunited in our headquarters in Enugu for the wedding of our friends, Dick Bergman and his bride, Nancy. After that weekend, when all the guests were ready to move back to their villages again, we and two other couples chartered the Institute's car to be able to carry lots of provisions along with us. In Abakaliki we parted, one couple went on by public taxi, Bernhard and I were taken right to our doorstep while Paul drove with the third couple to their own location about 60 miles further south.

I was glad to be home, for since the night before I had not been feeling well. I had not been able to keep any food down. Had I eaten something at the wedding reception that caused my stomach to be upset? Or was it just an ordinary malaria attack?

After taking a strong dose of malaria treatment, I slumped down on my bed. Bernhard had, of course, to go into his cot too. I was too weak to run after him. Only with great effort was I able to go to the kitchen and prepare him some baby cereal and crawl right back to bed, feeding him there. The malaria treatment had no effect, the day seemed to have no end. Bernhard finally fell asleep after much crying - he felt that something was wrong - but I could not sleep. There was a pain developing in my chest so that I hardly dared to breathe.

The next day dawned and I was no better. No question of going to get help - I was too weak and nauseated. At last Paul arrived back in the afternoon. He was alarmed.

"If you are not better by tomorrow, I will take you to Itigidi Hospital. How good that we have the Institute's car just now!"

We set out the next morning and our Dutch friends at the hospital received us very warmly. I was their private guest while the husband doctor ordered all kinds of tests. Nothing was found.

With a heavy heart, Paul had to leave me, for he had promised to bring the car back to Enugu for other members to use it. He took Bernhard with him. On his return two days later, the doctor was able to tell him his diagnosis: infectious hepatitis. I was seriously dehydrated and the doctor advised an immediate transfer to the bigger hospital in Umuahia. Another blow: Bernhard suddenly developed a high fever! The doctor's family graciously offered to nurse him while Paul would accompany me to Umuahia hospital.

They even offered their hospital car plus driver who raced south, over all the many potholes in the road. Why such a hurry? Was I in a serious condition? Yet I was not afraid. The Lord had told me a secret that morning as I read the verse in Psalm 118:17,

"I shall not die, but live  
and declare the works of the Lord."

Yes, I was ready to declare the works of the Lord among the Izi people - He would let me live!

After that record-breaking race over incredibly bad roads, I was grateful to be in a bed and rolled into a hospital room. The doctor arrived immediately and put me 'on the drip'. I hadn't taken any food or drink for exactly one week.

By now I was completely exhausted. I was hardly aware of Paul's presence in the room. I did not know what he went through, what he suffered, as the doctor told him not to leave the hospital grounds for the next few days since my case was 'very serious'. The kind Scottish doctor took Paul into his own home, but whenever Paul could, he sat at my bedside, praying, reading or writing. As soon as I had enough strength, I told him about the Lord's promise to me, and that mightily strengthened his faith too. He told me only much later about the real danger I had been in and how he had cried out to God that he could not do the Izi work without me. He had claimed my healing in faith.

After a few days, I felt a little better, but there was no question of getting up. The doctor's verdict was complete bed rest in the hospital for 3-4 weeks. But at least Paul was allowed to go back and find out what had happened in the meantime to Bernhard whom we had left sick in the care of the doctor's family in Itigidi.

He found him well again and was able to take him to one of our translation teams who had just begun their work nearby, Klaus and Janice Spreda. There he was lovingly cared for while Paul went back to Abakaliki and house building. Usually over the weekend he would come and visit me, not minding the tedious, rough journey by public transport. Every time, he would bring to the hospital cook some special treat for me to complement the boring diet: some fish or a piece of tender chicken - luxuries, only to be had in the big city Enugu! I tried hard to pick up

strength, but it was a slow process as eating was an unpleasant task, usually bringing nausea and vomiting.

After four weeks the doctor agreed to have me discharged, but only on condition that I would continue to rest, in a horizontal position! When Paul came the last time to take me home, part of the way to Enugu, by train, he brought with him an invitation of our government friends in Abakaliki. They were going on vacation and I was welcome to spend that time in their home! How wonderful! I was able to stay in their guest room, cared for by their efficient African cook, while Paul could continue with the pipe laying and other installations, and move into our new Izi-house!

Those two weeks proved to be one of the many mountain tops in my life. No visitors except the kind cook who tried to coax me into eating several times a day, and sometimes Paul, who was very busy with finishing the work on the house, the packing, and moving all by himself - and that without a car. The old colonialists, years ago, had chosen the most beautiful spot in Abakaliki for their residential buildings: a slight elevation of land from where the view seemed endless. In the far distance one could even distinguish the blue outlines of the Cameroon mountains! The windows of my room faced south and from my bed, all I saw was one enormous carpet of green - the land of the Izi. Had God put me here for a purpose? To remind me day by day of the people whom He loved, but who did not know Him, had not even heard about him?

What did the Lord want to tell me? I had ample time to read, to meditate, to pray.

It was in my reading of Haggai that the Lord seemed to give me an answer: an encouragement, and a choice with a promise.

The encouragement was to go on with the work we had started, to 'build the house of the Lord':

*"Go... and build my house so that I may take pleasure in it and be honoured." (1:8)*  
*"Be strong... and work. For I am with you... And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear." (2:4,5)*

Yes, we had already had a glimpse of the vastness and the hardness of the task, and we were glad for that encouraging green light.

The second point concerned a basic choice, a setting of priorities. What was more important to me: the work of the Lord or 'my' house and 'my' family?

*"You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little... I blew it away. Why? Because of my house which remains a ruin while each of you is busy with his own house..." (1:9)*

The Lord seemed to be telling me, "I know that you are torn between working for Me - learning Izi, and later literacy and translation - and spending time with your family, being a good wife and mother. You may choose afresh: Do you want to spend a lot of time building up your own family? Don't you realise that I am able to multiply the little time you may give to your family so that you will not be the loser, but your measures will be overflowing? Do you want to continue to trust Me for that?"

With tears I answered, "Yes, Lord!" How could I say otherwise?

And then in Haggai 2:19 came the wonderful promise:

"From this day on, I will bless you."

That sentence kept ringing in my ears all through the following days. "From this day on, I will bless you." Looking out onto the green carpet of Izi country, I heard over and over again, "From this day on, I will bless you. My Spirit is with you. Do not fear." Yes, I wanted to trust this Lord fully.