

Books that friends send to me

By Edwin Madunagu

that singular encounter revealed that his anti-socialism grew from his dislike of Kwame Nkrumah's politics.

One day Kwabena handed me a slim book, *A Letter to Soviet Leaders* written by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, an exiled Russian writer who, in 1970, won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Solzhenitsyn had spent several years in Soviet concentration camps. His letter to the Soviet leaders was a total denunciation of the regime and the leadership of the ruling Communist Party. It was clear that my Ghanaian friend had erroneously equated socialism, communism and Marxism with Soviet Concentration camps and political repression and sincerely wished to "liberate" me from the socialist ideology and its corrupting influence. I have passed through this type of experience so many times in the last 30 years. But nowadays, my conservative and right-wing "educators" are no longer patronising. Some of them are even apologetic in their self-appointed mission of "converting" me.

Less than two years after the Kwabena encounter, I was detained by Gowon's military junta. After about 10 weeks, I requested for something to read. I did not ask for any book in particular. Just something to read. In response, the camp commander sent me two books: *Holy Bible* and *The First Circle*, a fat novel written by the same Alexander Solzhenitsyn. I thanked the guard for the Bible but asked why I was being given a novel. He said he did not know, and that, in any case, "books are books." But I knew, even then, why the Bible and other religious books are sent by irreligious powers to those in bondage. I read the New Testament section of the Bible twice or so. I enjoyed it. Despite my anger, I read *The First Circle*. It was a story

of the human suffering in Soviet concentration camps.

In July 1983 an elderly Roman Catholic Reverend Sister of Irish nationality, teaching English at the University of Calabar, was retired for reasons not unconnected with identification with our radical politics in the University. Despite the fact that the woman helped to establish the department and had only a year to attain the mandatory retiring age, she was sent away. Her departing gift to me was not the Bible but a book of three plays, *Sizwe Bansi is dead; The Island; and Statement after an arrest*, all stories of the struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa. With the book came a message from the Sister inscribed on the title page: "With my thanks, prayers and loving good wishes for your future projects and unselfish struggle for a just society". It was dated July 7, 1973.

Evil men who denied me freedom sent me a Bible; a woman of God whose life was centred on the Bible gave me a book recording struggles for freedom. It is more than an irony. I was to receive more religious book presents in subsequent years. In 1988, a junior colleague of mine at *The Guardian*, a female, gave me a big and heavily annotated edition of the Bible. Although her name was already written in the Bible, she decided to give it to me. There was no inscribed message, not even a verbal one from her. She simply handed me the Holy Book.

In 1991, still at *The Guardian*, I became close to a Consultant to the newspaper. He was a Moslem and a prince from one of the northern states. Urbane and generous, the man had a business empire extending beyond the shores of Nigeria. He was polit-

ical, but not a politician, and took pride to advertising himself as a conservative and a feudalist. One day, on his return from one of his visits to the Emirate, he handed me a big, beautifully-bound, copy of the Ku'ran. He said that it was a present from his uncle, a religious and traditional patriarch. I asked if there was any accompanying message. He said no. Any implicit expectation? My friend said no. His uncle just wanted me to appreciate the Holy Book.

I received several other religious book presents while at *The Guardian*, but the gift of the Bible in 1988 and that of the Ku'ran in 1991 remain very strong in my memory. One of these other books which I still have, but whose sender I have forgotten is titled: "*I found God in Russia*". I took the little book and read it. I wanted to review it in an article suggesting that the title was opportunistic and commercially-motivated and that the content could have been condensed into an ordinary Sunday sermon of not more than 1,500 words. I dropped the idea when I was advised, and was convinced, that I would be grossly misunderstood in a country, such as ours, with such a high degree of religious pretentiousness.

My birthday in 1996 was quite noisy, because it coincided with an important event: the formal opening of our library. I received two book presents - both from women: *Manufacturing Consent*: a political economy of mass communication and a Bible. The sender of the second book is a Reverend whose attitude to life has intrigued me. When her husband and his family worried her too much, she quietly separated from the man; when the University of Calabar, where she was teaching, worried her too much, she left the University. And when her younger brother whom he trained in school began to worry her over their late

father's estate, she left the estate. Having left everything she could possibly leave, she left the country to join her son who had left ahead of her.

I shall now take a leap to my last birthday, May 15, 2005. Altogether, I received nine books and a religious sticker. I shall pick out three for brief comments. I said earlier that I came to explicitly socialist and Marxist consciousness at the University of Lagos. That was in the early to middle 1970s. I should also add that during that critical period in my life I shared a room with an "Egba-Lagos" young man who was then, and has ever since remained, a very close friend of mine. He was reading Architecture while I was a graduate student of Mathematics. The story is that my friend and I developed together in many things, but not in socialism or Marxism; we shared many interests, but not socialism or Marxism. On May 15, he and his spouse sent me a book, *Democracy: Life, liberties, property in Nigeria*, written by Professor Oluwole Adejare and published in 2004. I have already encountered, in it, a controversial statement: "Free market, not capitalism, is democracy's economic ideology".

The other two books (or rather, a book and sticker) were given to me by a young man who, for about seven years, has associated closely with me and the educational project I run here. He says I am his "mentor." The boy, who is now addressed as Pastor, considered it necessary and appropriate to send me a book in "*Effective Praying*" and a sticker with the message "*The Mighty is Our God*". I thanked him for the presents. Later, I requested a colleague of his to quietly inquire from him how I should use the sticker, knowing my attitude to religious exhibitionism. My young friend asked the emissary to "leave that thing" (translation). When I reported this to a colleague, I was told that my young friend simply meant that I could not be serious in my professed beliefs. You see!

I HAD often wondered why people - acting on their own, not by my request - would choose to send me particular books. But on May 15, 2005, I decided to look at the matter more closely by examining some of the books I had received over time. And this turned out to be an exercise in attempting to see, not just how people see me, but also how people can partly evaluate themselves by the types of presents they receive.

I should, however, separate the books sent to me by comrades, those with whom I share core ideological and political principles from the books I receive from friends with whom I share only broad social values, friends who appreciate and sympathise with some of the things I say or do, but do not necessarily support or endorse them. The books sent to me by comrades are meant, I believe, to strengthen me or draw my attention to facts or perspectives they think I was unaware of, or had neglected. I am therefore leaving out "comradely" book presents from this piece. With the rest I shall adopt a narrative, rather than, analytical, approach.

I became a self-conscious socialist, and then a Marxist, around 1973. That was during my sojourn in the University of Lagos. I was the Secretary of the Postgraduate Students Association and my girl-friend, now my spouse, as the Treasurer. Our radicalism alienated some members of the Association who could not understand why graduate students, expected to be "ladies" and "gentlemen", should be behaving like undergraduates and, to make matters worse, joining the latter in radical campus politics. A particularly alienated member of the association was a Ghanaian friend of mine called Kwebena. We, however, managed to maintain our personal friendship. Kwabena and I discussed politics only once, and it was an unpleasant experience. Thereafter, we avoided the subject. But