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Emmanuel C. Obi oral history interview by Charles Massucci and Fraser Ottanelli, October 10, 2009

Emmanuel C. Obi (Interviewee)

Charles Massucci (Interviewer)

Fraser M. Ottanelli (Interviewer)

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Charles Massucci: Good afternoon. This is Chuck Massucci, along with Dr. Ottanelli. Today is October 10, 2009, and we are currently at the University of South Florida Tampa Campus Library conducting an oral history with—Ogbueshi?

Emmanuel C. Obi: That's correct.

CM: —Emmanuel Obi for the Asaba Memorial Project. Welcome, sir. I'd like to begin by asking you to state and spell your first name—or your full name—and give us your date of birth and place of birth.

EO: Okay, my full name is—first of all, you got the first one right. *Ogbueshi* means a traditional chief in Nigeria, Asaba in particular. My first name is—okay, actually with that chieftaincy title, there's a name that is attached to it. My name is Udokanicho; that is "We want peace." And then my first name is Emmanuel, like you know, that means "God is with us"; and Chukwumeke is my middle name. That means that "God is powerful." And my last name is Obi, O-b-i. Thank you.

CM: Where were you born, sir?

EO: Well, I was born in Benin City. Benin City used to be the capital of the then-Mid-West State of Nigeria. I was born on June 27, 1953.

CM: So, in 1967, you were—?

EO: I started my education in Benin City; that was where I was born. At this time, I have only been to Asaba once in my life, and that was when we went to bury my grandmother. So, when the Biafran soldiers marched on to Benin and captured Benin and then marched on to Ore, and then they met resistance as they were retreating, that was when the killing actually—the killing and the beating actually started in Benin City. If you were not from Benin, you were beaten, you were kicked, you were killed, so we had to run back to Asaba. That was my second visit to Asaba, my hometown.

CM: Do you have a recollection of when these instances in Benin started, a month or year?

EO: Well, actually, at that point I was so small—I mean, I was about twelve, thirteen, when this whole thing started. So, the exact date I cannot tell you, you know, but I just have—actually, all these things that happened, I had suppressed them for years. Not until today, when I started hearing these various testimonies, that it was just like playing a videotape of my life that I had all these years suppressed. That was extremely emotional for me.

CM: With this revival of your memories, do you recall who you fled back to Asaba with?

EO: Actually, what happened was that my father, he had a family of eleven. He had eleven children. My most senior brother, he just graduated from one of—University of Ibadan, and what happened was that he got a scholarship. He started working, but got a scholarship from Syracuse University. It so happened that, right about the time he was supposed to go back to college, that was when this war started. The Biafran troops had already captured Benin, but there was an arrangement with the American government to send some black Americans from the embassy.

So, those black Americans came in—I was a little kid, but they came in a long car. They were all dressed in black suits. And they also brought a black suit for my brother to dress like them. My brother was about six [feet] two [inches], six-three, and the men they sent were about the same height. So, he was put in the middle, and whenever they were stopped at the checks—you know, the checkpoints—they couldn't tell that he was a Nigerian. They thought he was one of the diplomats that came from Lagos to Benin and were going back. That was how come they took him to the U.S.

But my other brothers, the whole family, my dad rented a truck, a big—we call it lorry; that was a big— So, we packed everything we had—most of the belongings that we had; you know, we couldn't take everything, but we just took the most essential things and loaded everything in the truck and we all drove to Asaba. And that was how come we left Benin for Asaba.

CM: The date that has been noted for this event, for the shooting or for the massacre, was October 7.

EO: Nineteen sixty-seven. Right.

CM: Can you remember how many days prior to that that you arrived with your family in Asaba?

EO: Okay. We arrived in Asaba, and my dad had two houses. One was in the village, and then the other one was close to the River Niger. So, we were in the house in the village. My father had just completed the house about a year before then. We moved in with all the belongings that we brought back from Benin. When we started hearing the shelling, you know, there was shooting, it was distant at first and we didn't take it seriously, because we were kids. So, it continued to approach, and as it got worse, my dad then decided that we have to move from the village to our house at Cable Point. That was how come we moved from there to the house at Cable Point.

CM: Do you remember the general distance in kilometers from the two houses?

EO: That should be about, maybe—it's about fifteen miles. Fifteen miles.

CM: Okay. As you're making this transition from one house to the other, do you recall the conversation or the concerns of the adults?

EO: There was general chaos in the whole town. Everybody was running helter-skelter. People were running to the left, to the right, because the bullets were coming and everybody was trying to get away from their homes to a place of safety. So, we had to do the next best thing, since we had a house that was further by the River Niger. We thought it probably would be safer to be there than to be in the village, because the bullets were coming left, right and center in the village. We had to run down to that house.

CM: Prior to the arrival of the federal troops, had you experienced any interaction with the Biafran troops?

EO: Well, the Biafran troops occupied Asaba at that point. I mean, they were peaceful. We didn't have any problems with them; they didn't have any problems with us. There were no killings then. We lived together, because we spoke literally the same language. So, we didn't have any problems with the Biafran soldiers.

CM: What are your first memories of the arrival, or the first time you observed the federal troops in your town?

EO: Okay. See, when we moved to our house at Cable Point by the River Niger, one of my older brothers had a friend who was a seminarian, who happened to have come back on holidays to come stay with his parents in Asaba. He came to visit my brother, and he was caught up by the war. He couldn't go back because the bullets were going left, right and center. I mean, the bullets were all over the place. So, he stayed with us, hoping that when things cooled down then he could go back to the village to go join his parents.

You know, we couldn't get out of the house for over four days. We were locked in. Why? Because right behind our house, the Biafran soldiers lay ambush, and were shooting the Nigerian soldiers on the other side. The Nigerian soldiers, on the other hand, were shelling right across our house to try to kill those guys that were—you know, I think it was by God's providence, only by God's providence. I'm sure that he put an umbrella over our house, just to protect us. And the reason why I say that, the reason why I say that is simple.

My father was a very, very religious man. When we were in Benin, he helped build several churches. He also was an interpreter during the Gospels in the church. He not only traveled far and wide within Nigeria, but he was so generous that if he goes to a family and looks and sees that this family is struggling, he will take the first son and he will train that first son, put him in school, when he graduates, help him get a job to support that family. That was the kind of person my dad was. Every morning, he rings a small bell and we all gather to say our prayers together, as a family. Before we go to bed, he does the same thing.

That's why I believe that it was only by God's providence, because God was taking care of us, through him, that we were able to survive this thing. My dad made us pray from morning till night when these bullets were going left, right and center and we were at the middle of it. How come that shelling didn't destroy our house and kill us all? It's only

God. It's only by God's grace. These guys were laying ambush just right behind our house. Right behind our house.

CM: So, you were a direct eyewitness to the combat between the two factions of soldiers.

EO: We were there. I was there from the beginning to the very end. We saw how these bullets were flying through the windows, but none came into our house. Until today, I believe that was God's miracle.

CM: Can you estimate the amount of time that your family laid in the middle of this battle?

EO: Do you know, that time didn't mean anything to me at that point? We didn't know when it was daytime, we didn't know when it was nighttime. All we knew was we were on our knees praying and praying with no food. The only food that we ate was dry corn. That's by—I don't know, that we were left in the house. You couldn't go out to do anything. We were all holed up in the house.

CM: Okay. The stories that have been discussed today, I'm sure, in your past about the death of the civilians, were you an eyewitness to any of those events?

EO: I was not, but I'll tell you where I come in.

CM: Okay.

EO: We were still holed up in that house when, after some days—like I said, I lost count—things subsided. The next thing we heard was the town crier, who was making some announcements. And we said, "That's here? Did we hear something?" And it was getting closer and closer, and this man came to our compound and was announcing that the federal troops have taken over Asaba, that everything's okay, that we should come out; they want us to come out and dance and welcome the Nigerian soldiers to Asaba. You know, they said that everything was okay, and it's now okay for us to come out and welcome them.

So, we did not leave after that announcement, but we felt that since the shelling and the gunshots have died down that maybe we can go back to our other house to see our other relatives that live there, and make sure that everything was okay and that our house was

still intact. But at this point, my brother's friend—who was a seminarian, as I mentioned earlier—he decided that since they had announced that everything was okay, that he would now go back home to join his family. That was the last time we saw him.

When we decided to go over to our other house to see the extent of the damage, what we saw— (very long pause) We saw the seminarian.

CM: If you need any Kleenex, they're next to you.

Fraser Ottanelli: Take your time.

EO: He was lying face-down. He had been killed.

My brother, who used to be a seminarian but dropped out of the seminary—we used to have a tenant, who was a preacher, a Pentecostal preacher. He left his cassock, what they call a cassock—the white robe that they wear—and he had a staff and a Bible. So, my older brother disguised himself as a priest or pastor, a preacher, with the Bible, and we decided to—you know, he disguised himself on our way to the other house. Each soldier that he saw, he said, "Bless you, my son." And as we moved from our house at the River Niger to our house in the village, we literally, we literally had to step gingerly, so that we don't step over dead bodies that were scattered all over the place. I was about twelve, thirteen years old. Up till now, I'd never seen a dead body. And to have seen my people, to have seen the way that my people were mowed down—!

We continued. We continued. And when we decided to stop and go back was when we got to one house. We saw the whole family lying on top of each other; the heap was about like this. (indicates height) Everybody mowed down. And at that point, we decided to go back. It was not safe, so we went back to the house by the River Niger and holed ourselves back in there.

CM: Do you recall the reactions of the soldiers as your brother blessed them and you interacted with them?

EO: You could not even look at their eyes. Their eyes were red-shot. Their eyes were so bloody red that you dared not look at their eyes. Whether they were all on some kind of drugs or whatever, I have no idea, but they didn't look human. They did not look human.

CM: When you arrived back at your home, did you guys hole up there for a longer period?

EO: We had to hole up there for a longer period. So, the dancing and all that, we did not participate, because what we saw trying to go back to our home in the village told us something. We did not come out to participate in that dance. I lost my uncle, my uncle the great artist. If you go to our church today, the big Catholic church that we have, St. Joseph's Catholic Church, his painting is still there on the stained glass.

CM: What was his name?

EO: Mr. Egbufu. His painting is still there. He led one of the delegations, one of the dance groups. He was killed. He was murdered.

CM: Was there a time when you could finally return as a family to the village? Did you make any observations then?

EO: Well, we decided to pick up from where we started, because after a while it looked like things started returning to normal, after some weeks. My mother used to be a petty trader, and my father a schoolteacher. So my mother, with the little money she had, decided to start petty trading again. And what did she do? She bought cigarettes, she bought kola nuts, stuff that the army, the soldiers, would buy. And I was the one that went and sold those things in the barracks. As a kid, as I carried these things on my head to go sell to the soldiers, you look to your left, to your right. You still have some people that are swollen, people killed.

I mean, this, I believe—I didn't know that I had suppressed it this much till I heard some of these testimonies today, and it took me way back to what has been inside me all these years—almost forty years ago. Almost forty years ago, and I saw there, with people's testimony a videotape of what happened during the war. I thought I had gone past it, but it is something that I am trying to relive it again.

All those innocent souls that were killed, they did not start the war. They have deprived us of the breadwinners of our families. Most of the families had no breadwinners anymore. My dad did not die during the war. My dad, like I said, he had a heart. He liked to help people. My dad could go in the bushes and put leaves together and concoct things that will treat anything. Even doctors in Benin were referring patients to him to treat.

And what did he do, for goodness? What did he do during this war? When things cooled off, he went into the bushes to look for people to help, and he was caught up by the war. He did not come back. He did not come back. So, we had only my mother to take care of all of us. After the war, we started hearing rumors that my dad was alive, holed up in some bush. So, we contacted the Red Cross to see if they can put a search team to look for my dad.

After some months, almost a year or more, they located my dad. But at that point, he was half gone. He was half gone. We had moved to Lagos, because things were better at that point, so we had moved to Lagos where my oldest brother had a good job. He was taking care of all of us, the whole family. So, they brought my dad back there, but then, he was just a picture of himself. He was gone.

CM: Mentally? Emotionally?

EO: Emotionally, mentally. He was—I mean, there was no food where he was. He was suffering from what they call kwashiorkor. He ate whatever he could find in the bush, ate lizards, ate whatever, just to survive. He was gone. He didn't live for more than six months before he passed on.

CM: And that was in Lagos?

EO: That was in Lagos.

CM: Did your family maintain their connections back to Asaba, with the homes, or when you left did you stay gone?

EO: We stayed gone until my dad died, and then we had to come back to bury him in Asaba.

FO: What happened to the seminarian, to the seminarian's body?

EO: Well, you know, all I saw was I saw the seminarian, who was with us. All he did when he was with us, when we were praying, he was crying. He was crying through. I, as a kid, was wondering, "What's with him? What is with him?" Maybe he already knew what was going to happen to him. So, he cried all through.

I don't know what happened to him. I don't know what became of his body. I think his family members came and got him. But I saw him. I saw him lying face-down.

CM: Part of this project is to discuss the burials that occurred. Do you have any either indirect or direct knowledge of how these bodies were buried, if there are mass graves? Do you have any knowledge of that?

EO: Yes, I do, because in November of last year, I led Erin Kimmerle, Melissa Pope, and all the others to Nigeria. We went together. I actually, with Dr. [Ifeanyi] Uraih and a lawyer, Chuck Mkezi, we took them to Asaba. And when we got there, I actually initially didn't know where these people were buried, but there was someone who was part of the guys that dug the grave. He showed us an area where 450 people were buried in one grave; and just next to it, another 150 people; and next to that, another 75 people—just in this little area.

CM: What did he tell you about the process of burial? Was it by hand?

EO: What he did, what they did, they gave them shovels, so they had to dig and dig and then get a big log and push the bodies into the hole, the ditches that they dug. And then they covered them up.

CM: Do you have any opinions of the value, or do you think it's appropriate, for this projected excavation? Do you think it's something that should be done?

EO: Well, when we went home, it was something that was agreed. I took them to the Asagba of Asaba—that is our traditional ruler, the king of our town—and we were very well received. He called his council of chiefs, we talked to this council of chiefs, and one of the other professors that went with us, Dr. [Matthias] Okoye from the Nebraska Forensic Institute, he introduced the delegation. I think they had some job to do in Lagos, and they wanted to piggyback the Asaba project with that. After he introduced us, he gave us—we also talked to the people of the village where this thing happened. We had a meeting with them, and after we had the meeting I made a speech, told them why we were there. After they heard all the speeches that we made, they said yes, they'll give us full access to do whatever we wanted to do. It's just that we haven't followed up since after that visit.

So, I talked to the chairman of the local government a week and a half ago, and he was asking me, "Whatever happened to the people that you brought? Is there going to be a

continuation? Why did everything stop?” But I couldn’t give him an answer, because I had to find out what’s going to really happen. I told him I would get back in touch with him, that maybe they are still trying to put things together and all that, but work will still continue. I believe that—they said that whenever the crew is ready, that we can make a connection back with those guys and get something going.

CM: And for the people of Asaba and for yourself, is the importance of this excavation to identify the remains, or is it to create a memorial? Or are both important?

EO: It’s both. Both are extremely important, because some people don’t even know where their loved ones are buried as we speak. The guy that made the speech a while ago, Ify Uraih, does not know where his brother is today. He is asking everybody, “Have you seen my brother? Please let me know.” How will he ever know?

CM: Is it your opinion that the people of Asaba and the leaders will welcome this and participate in it all the way through the technical aspects of maybe DNA?

EO: Well, like I said, when we went last year the permission was already granted. When we went last year. You know, people of my stature won’t mind if we let it go for a protracted period of time. If they had come back and then communicated, “This is where we are; this is what is going to happen next,” just follow it up, follow it up, follow it up, I’m sure things will move smoother. But there has been a long silence, and people are beginning to wonder, “Is this a trick? What did these guys come to do?” Some of the guys that went, (inaudible) and the rest, they took samples. They showed them. They took samples, they took pictures. I’m sure Erin [Kimmerle] has a good documentation of some of these things, you know, when we went. And after that, there was a big, huge reception that was given to the king, and there were gifts given to them. I’m sure you guys—yeah, there were gifts given to them.

So, my thing is, if this was followed up, it would have made it smoother, would have made it much easier. But the gap, the length of time, is getting too long. So, maybe when this whole thing was to restart, maybe there might be a fresh communication with those guys, and we’ll see where we go from there.

FO: I hope these are not—it’s not an easy process.

EO: I know it’s not an easy process. That’s something that we have to explain to them, that yes, we came on this so-and-so a time, but we have to put a few things together, the

permission that we got, we had to process and certify it, and that takes time. I'm sure they will understand.

CM: But the communication process needs to be improved.

EO: That's right. That's what I'm saying.

CM: There's one other line of questioning I'd like to ask you about. You were young at the time of this.

EO: That's right. That's correct.

CM: Do you have an opinion as to why this atrocity occurred?

EO: I think I do. I think I do. There was a major in the Nigerian army at that time, Major [Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna] Nzeogwu. He was the one that organized the assassination of the Sardauna of Sokoto [Sir Ahmadu Bello]. The Sardauna of Sokoto is the spiritual leader of the Muslims in the North. So, the mandate was that Nzeogwu was assumed to have come from Asaba. The mandate was, "Exterminate all males in Asaba," not knowing that Nzeogwu was from Opanam, several miles away from Asaba. That was what we heard.

CM: Do you believe he had the support of the government at the time he carried this out, or stated the orders?

EO: Well, they think he did not have the permission of the government, but what he wanted to do, because it looked like the country was getting corrupt, so he wanted to get rid of the key people that helped with this corruption. The plan that he had was not carried out 100 percent, see. The plan that he had, there was somewhere that somebody dropped the ball. One side was killed, the other side wasn't killed, and that triggered the Civil War.

FO: But in reference to the actual killing that took place in Asaba, do you think that was a deliberate act that was mandated from the top down, or do you think it was more the reaction of troops on the ground?

EO: Whether it was mandated from the top down, I have no idea, but I know this story to be fact, that Nzeogwu, who is from Opanam, started—that it was because of him, they tried to get him by killing all the males from Asaba, because they thought he was from Asaba. Nzeogwu himself was killed before the war started.

CM: At this point, is there anything that you would like to add to this record, or any knowledge that we have not asked you about that you'd like to discuss before we finish?

EO: Well, I think you guys have done a great job. I want to thank you guys for all that you're doing. If we can improve the communication between this institution and the institution back home, that will help keep it alive, because when there's a lapse in communication, people assume the whole thing is dead. So, I think that is something that has to be looked into.

FO: Okay. Thank you very much for sharing your story.

EO: Thank you. I appreciate it.

End of interview