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Victoria Nwanze oral history interview by S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli, December 16, 2009

Victoria Chibuzo Nwanze (Interviewee)

S. Elizabeth Bird (Interviewer)

Fraser M. Ottanelli (Interviewer)

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Elizabeth Bird: All right, this is Wednesday, December 16, [2009]. We are in Benin City in Nigeria, on the campus of the University of Benin. And today, this is Elizabeth Bird, we have Fraser Ottanelli, and we have all the gentlemen who were here in the previous interview.¹ (laughs) And we are interviewing—if you would like to say your name, please, for the tape.

Victoria Nwanze: I'm Mrs. Victoria Chibuzo Nwanze.

EB: Thank you. Well, thank you very much for agreeing to do this. We'd like, really—since the time is a little limited, what we'd like to do is to take you straight to just before October 7 [1967]. We understand that you were at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka?

VN: Yes.

EB: And when did you come home from there, back to Asaba?

VN: We were actually on holidays, and then I was doing my vacation job at Enugu, when they now shelled Enugu. The war got to Enugu, so I went back to Asaba. This was ending of September. So, I was in Asaba for almost one week before we heard the shelling. Of course, the people in Asaba had not heard of it—had not heard it before.

¹EB is referring to the interview with Emmanuel Nwanze, Mrs. Nwanze's husband; the DOI is A34-00013.

But I knew that this was the same type of shelling we heard at Enugu. But the Biafran soldiers who were there kept telling us that that was not shelling, that that was some—that it was their own shelling, driving the Nigerians, that they were seven miles to Benin. But then we were reasoning, “How can there be seven miles to Benin, and you could hear the sound so much?” And then, people were afraid to contradict them, but we knew it could not be true. And if you tuned Biafran radio, which was the only thing we could hear at that time, they were telling us they were seven miles to Benin, that in fact they have driven the vandals back to Benin, and they will soon capture Benin. Until the shelling destroyed something in Asaba; this was on October 5.

Soon after, everybody ran. We lived along the road, so many people ran across the Niger Bridge, but we stayed in our house. We were in the house when—this was on October 5, when they came and attacked the house. We were hiding, we found out they were relentless. So we came out. My younger brother, Gabriel, who was with us, came out because he was big. As soon as he came out, they said he was a Biafran soldier. And then, he didn't know what was happening. They asked him, “Attention!” He did attention. They said, “Hey, look at this, he's a soldier.” Then my mother intervened, because my mother was a very vibrant woman, so she stood in the middle and said, “No, he's a student on holidays.”

Anyway, they—one of them camped, the man who was (inaudible). And they took us to St. Patrick's College Asaba. So, that was where we stayed on that first day, the evening, fifth, Friday evening. Then Saturday morning, seventh, they told us that everything had calmed down in Asaba, that we could go.

EB: The soldiers told you?

VN: Yes, soldiers told us. In fact, they led us back to the town. At that time, they got some priests and the reverend sisters from the—from some Catholic, St.—

EB: St. Brigid's [Catholic Church]?

VN: No, not St. Brigid's, St. Joseph's Catholic Church. The reverend for the church of St. Joseph's back then was Father Flynn, an Irishman.

EB: Fee?

VN: Father Flynn, F-l-y-n-n. And then, Father Ogboko, Monsignor Ogboko, was a lecturer at the senior seminary in Ibadan. But because of the crisis, he was in Asaba, and was staying at St. Joseph's.

So, they took all of us to St. Patrick's College Asaba. Then, when they said that everything had calmed down, they took us down. But because of the strategic nature of our house, my mother decided that it would not be wise to expose ourselves there, particularly for the young girls, my sister and I. So we went inside the village, to my mother's place. So we stayed with our grandmother. Everything was calm, and my mother now said that we should stay there, with my father and everybody, and went to—she goes to our house to see what she could get for us.

So, she was away when, suddenly, people came from different places in Asaba than we are. My father had two friends, one Mr. Michael Ogu, who was from my mother—who was a cousin; and then, (inaudible)—again, a cousin, because his mother was from my place. So, they came from Okobu's house to my grandmother's place to tell us that—to tell my father that everybody was out, that they had decided to go and welcome the soldiers. So, my grandmother quickly brought out white clothes, and they tried.

And of course, we girls—when we got there, there were other cousins who came to my grandmother's place. So those of us who were girls—what they were after that time was raping, that we should not be raped. So they started manufacturing babies. I carried my brother, my younger brother, at the back, and my grandmother gave us—gave me her dress. So, I wore her dress, tied my brother at the back, and tied—and she tied my wrapper so that I would look like an old woman; the same thing with my sister and the same thing with my cousin, so we all matched.

When we came to the village square—that was near my mother's place—it was there we saw a lot of corpses. I recognized some. And then we passed, and many more people were coming to join. This time, they were very hostile. My grandmother was an old woman, a little deformed, but the way they pulled her out, right in our presence there, because she lived in a thatched house. They set fire in her house. So, when we were going, we knew that there was no house. No, I think I'm mixing it up. It was the second time that they set fire.

So, we now went to the village square, where everybody gathered. We followed them. I didn't know Asaba very well at that time, but we all went in a troop and got to a place. They said, "Women and children, this way; men, this way." So, that was how they separated us. And they took the women into St. Joseph's Maternity Ward, where we stayed. Of course, we were surrounded by soldiers. When it was dark—I couldn't tell the time—they came and told us that we could go home, that they had finished their

meeting, because they told us that they were going to hold a meeting with the men. They had finished the meeting, and that we could go home, the men had gone home. So, when we got home, everywhere was quiet. We were waiting. When he and another cousin of ours, P.C. Ojobu.

Fraser Ottanelli: (inaudible)

VN: Okay, P.C. Ojobu. And our uncle later, Joseph Nwamambo, and another cousin, Onyama, our first cousin, came in. So, Joseph, our uncle, was the first person to tell my grandmother that they had finished all the men in Asaba, and started narrating [to] us. He was narrating that we are now coming one by one. He wasn't injured, but P.C. had bullet wounds scattered all over his body, and our cousin (inaudible) had a massive bullet wound at the back. The wife was heavily pregnant. So, that was not what she would see. At that time, she started boiling water and cleaning him up. So, that was how we stayed that night, until very early in the morning. My mother came and told us that she had made—that Asaba people were running away. Then, she asked us to go. We couldn't see my immediate younger brother, but the rest of us now followed her until she got us to the edge of the bush outside Asaba. We passed their village. Everybody had left. Then, we got to the edge of the bush—

Unidentified Man: (inaudible)

VN: And (inaudible) we are very close to the bush. So, we now went there, inside the bush, and my mother went back. We are ordering her to come; she said she wasn't going; she wanted to see the end of it.

Anyway, we now got to this place they called Achalla—or Achalla Ibusa—where we met many Asaba people. It was there we were when some distant cousins of my mother came from Ibusa to say that their father sent them, that everybody who is a descendent of (inaudible)—that was my grandfather—should come. So, from there, we marched to another village, Ibusa. So that was where we stayed until—they were very nice to us—until my mother now came from Asaba again. This time—because when Asaba people heard that they had stopped killing, they were going back. But my mother's uncle said none of the children will leave until he saw my mother. So my mother came and said that she was going to take the boys only, that they are still raping girls. So that was how my sister and I and some other cousins remained in Ibusa till December. We went back to—my mother came and collected us on the twenty-third of December.

EB: So you now went home.

VN: Yes, to Asaba. So that was—this was the first killing. Then, the second one was around the Easter season—

FO: It's time to go.

VN: —when the Biafrans infiltrated.

Ify Uraih: We don't have time.

EB: Two-fifteen? We've got—

FO: (inaudible)

VN: No, that is, uh—

EB: What time is the plane, exactly?

IU: Three-fifteen. And it will take us one hour to get there.

EB: Three-fifteen? It'll take us an hour?

VN: And you have to eat.

FO: (inaudible)

IU: (inaudible) You have to eat.

Unidentified Man: Yes, quick bite, quick bite.

VN: No, the second, it was a very short day. The Biafran troops infiltrated from Ogwashi Uwu; in fact, there they killed Brother Roman Wicinski. And then, it was then, the Biafran—the soldiers said they killed. And they believed that we, being Igbos—

Unidentified Man: Sympathized.

VN: —had sympathized with them. So, that was when they now moved the whole village. Again, people ran into the bush. No more running across the Niger [River]. But those of us who couldn't run into the bush—again, by this time, we were still in our house, which was on the road. So we're an easy target: as soon as they come, they would just carry us to SPC. So we went to SPC, and by the time we came back—we stayed up to—

IU: One month.

VN: One month before we came back. By the time we came back, they had burnt my grandmother's house, which was because—again, we headed for that place to avoid the main road. But when we got there, there was no place to stay. We had to go back to our place.

EB: I just wanted to ask you very quickly: Did you know women and girls who were raped and assaulted?

VN: Uh, I only heard, I didn't see. Because we are all—we ran away and we didn't come back until the raping ended, so I only heard that this was—

IU: In the Nigerian culture, it is the most difficult thing to stop.

EB: Yeah, that's what I understand.

Unidentified Man: Not me, it didn't happen to me. (inaudible)

EB: Yeah, yes. Well, I'm sorry I couldn't talk to you—we'll have to come back and talk to you. (laughs) So, thank you.

End of interview

