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Patrick Obielue oral history interview by S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli, December 14, 2009

Patrick Obielue (Interviewee)

S. Elizabeth Bird (Interviewer)

Fraser M. Ottanelli (Interviewer)

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Interviewers: S. Elizabeth Bird (EB), Fraser Ottanelli (FO)
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Transcribed by: Jenica Ibarra
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[Transcriber's note: This interview takes place on the street, resulting in a lot of background noise.]

Elizabeth Bird: Um, can you first of all, for the tape, just state your name?

Patrick Obielue: My name's Patrick Obielue. That's my name.

EB: And what is your profession, occupation?

PO: I'm a civil servant.

Fraser Ottanelli: Do you want some water?

EB: Yeah.

FO: Yes?

EB: No, is it too soon then?

FO: (inaudible)

EB: Okay, all right.

FO: Yeah, yeah.

PO: I'm a civil defense officer.

EB: You're—?

PO: Civil defense officer.

EB: Civil defense officer, thank you. Um, now, could you talk a little bit about life in Asaba before the war, how—who you lived with, your family? Who was your family?

PO: Life in Asaba was very okay. We were enjoying ourselves very well. (inaudible) It was fine, it was okay.

EB: And, uh, what—

FO: Put the microphone—it's hidden, so—

PO: Yes, okay.

FO: Put it on the other side, put it on the other lapel. There you go.

EB: Thank you. So, your family was all—it was peaceful—what did your—what was your father's profession?

PO: My father was a school bursar, (inaudible).

EB: Um, okay, school? School?

PO: School bursar.

Ify Uraih: School bursar.

PO: Bursar. That person that collects school fees, and, uh, you know—

EB: Oh, a bursar, yes, yes, yes.

PO: A bursar, uh-huh.

EB: Um, how many people were there in your family?

PO: Um, we're—in my family, there's my father, my father's children, my mother, my stepmother, then my auntie, and the children.

EB: So, your (inaudible) is your—

PO: My father's junior brother, junior sister.

EB: Oh, yeah, okay. So, to talk a little bit about when you heard that the federal troops were coming, what was the news that was coming in October of 1967?

PO: That was in October 1967, we—well, we are schoolboys then, we didn't know what exactly was happening. But then, we started getting gunshot, hearing gunshot from one end of the town. And then, my father said the bullets have been entering into houses he owned. So, my father prepared us to flee away. So, as we were leaving towards Onitsha, my father understand that there could be danger there, so we had to take our (inaudible) and went to (inaudible) nearby bush. So there we stayed for some days, then myself and my younger ones came back home.

So, when we come back—before we came back home, they have already massacred people. So, we now got—I was about thirteen years at that time. So we now—I went to the place where they—the corpses were still there; they were not buried yet. So I was one of those people who participated in digging the mass grave. And they buried at least,

maybe thirty in one grave, some twenty, some ten. Just like that, in front of that place we went to. That is my own, my own place. So, that's where I buried a lot—and some were already decomposing, where you can poke somebody and their head would roll off. And we just put them into one grave. There was no coffin, nothing, nothing.

EB: So this was a few days, or a week? How long after the—

PO: That was almost a week, a week after.

EB: A week. So who—how many of you were doing this? How many people were?

PO: We were the youths of the village. Our seniors (inaudible), about, maybe thirty, that time: those who were remaining, those who were not killed. The young ones, of our age, were not touched that time. But our seniors who came out again from the bush after one week participated in the mass burial. Just dug shallow graves, and then put them there.

EB: Were there any soldiers still there?

PO: No, there were not—there were soldiers around, but because of our age, they would not attack us. But there were soldiers.

EB: So, did they tell you to do the burial, or did you—

PO: They did not tell us. It was smelling now. Everywhere was stinking, so we had to. We had to do the burial. Nobody instructed us. We knew it was our duty at that time to bury the dead.

EB: So these were, um—

(to someone else) Oh, oh, thank you.

(to PO) So, um, these were people who—there were no family—had they been able to find them, to come and get them?

PO: No, no, no, no. There, everybody was in the bush now, so you couldn't have come to see and identify the corpse. Nobody, nobody was out there. Even we, right there, could not have identified certain people, because they were already swollen up and—you know.

EB: Yeah.

PO: And that was (inaudible). After that again, in 1968, there was another operation.

EB: Yeah. Can we talk about that in a minute? I just want to finish.

PO: All right, okay, okay.

EB: So, um, how did you feel doing this? What was it like to have to do something?

PO: It was a terrible—you know, it was a terrible event.

EB: Yeah.

PO: Nobody was happy, even if your father was not there, but I was there. They slayed, you know, so many people (inaudible) were there. So, nobody was happy. You know, so.

EB: Did you personally have close relatives who were killed?

PO: What?

EB: Were some of your own relations killed?

PO: Um, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. There are—there's one (inaudible). (inaudible) There are many of them, many, many, many. But that is the day—that is when you cut out everybody. And some of them came out to—you see, what happened was, they asked them to come and dance, you understand that?

EB: Yes.

PO: Uh-huh. So they were going for dance, but they didn't know they were going to be killed. That's just—because so many people came out. That's it.

EB: Were there—at the time that you were burying everybody, and this was all happening, were there any women there looking for families? Were the women coming to help—

PO: No, no, no, no. Everybody was afraid, people were—it was only those of us who could come out. Many people had not the courage to come out. So many people could not come out and say, “This is my—I'm looking for my husband,” or, “I'm looking for my son.”

EB: So the women had all gone—

PO: Nobody was there.

EB: Nobody.

PO: Yeah.

EB: Yeah. So you just—you and the other people that did this, you just came out. You were volunteers, you—

PO: It was a duty we were supposed to perform, as the young people of the village. Even if somebody dies today, they are the people whose duty it is to bury those people. So it is to our honor to do that.

IU: The youths.

PO: The youths. So we knew that then. So it was our duty, then, to do it, so we have to do it without asking for anything. We do it, just our job.

EB: And there was no—so you were not able to do any ceremonies?

PO: No ceremony, no ceremony, no ceremony. It was very—

IU: Painful.

PO: It was painful now, so it was after—later, later, much, much later—that people started doing the ceremonies, you know, as it's supposed to be. There were not—because everyone (inaudible) now.

FO: How deep was the—?

EB: How deep did you bury—how did you?

PO: It was very shallow, not any more than two or three feet. We are young people now, we didn't have the strength to, you know, to dig deep—

IU: Big men are not there.

PO: Uh-huh. So we just dug, maybe for a little, realized this would get (inaudible).

IU: (inaudible)

EB: But you didn't dig individual graves for—

PO: No, no, no, no, it was just mass.

IU: Massive grave.

FO: Were you afraid? Were you afraid that something would happen to you afterwards?

PO: No. We were not afraid, no. (inaudible)

FO: You have great (inaudible).

EB: Oh, you (inaudible).

FO: (talking about food) There you go, get it all over the place.

EB: All right. Mmm.

PO: Mm-hm, good.

EB: That's good. Um, now, you had said that you remember in 1968, when the troops came back. Could you describe what happened then?

PO: When they came back, I noticed that everybody was taken to SPC [St. Patrick's College] as refugees. We were refugees in our own town, and we were not happy about it. And that was why they had the opportunity of burning so many houses, including my own father's house. They burned everything there. So, we came to the camp for some time. You know, we are being fed, but there's no food they give you, other than (inaudible) cook at your house. They were giving us nonsense; anything they liked, they give us. They were giving us (inaudible). So, we are not (inaudible), but there was nothing we could do.

EB: How long did you stay at SPC?

PO: We stayed—I stayed up to two months there.

EB: Two months?

PO: Yeah, sure.

EB: And when you came back to town, what did you find?

PO: Well, there were these—that was when they hunted (inaudible) at that time. They would seize some young men, even from the camp there. The soldiers would come and pick a man and say, “Biafran!” (inaudible) and pull it, they said, “Dig your grave.” The man would personally dig his grave, and they would shoot him there. So all these things happened. They would just pick a young man and say, “Come on, dig your grave.” And the man would dig his grave halfway, and they push him down, kill him. So they did all these things.

EB: This was in 1968?

PO: Yes, that was in 1968, yes.

EB: So you saw this happen?

PO: I saw this happen. I saw this. So many men were killed like that.

EB: Do you have any idea of how many people you saw this happen to?

PO: I saw about three or four.

EB: Three or four?

PO: Personally. If they see any adult man there, they would just drag him out of the—

EB: Was this after—

PO: So, that is why the adults, all of them ran away to the bush. Nobody came out until when the tension has died down.

EB: So this was happening near St. Patrick’s, or in—

PO: Yes, this was happening near St. Patrick’s and (inaudible) the camp. That’s where they have another (inaudible) in the car, that’s where they keep so many bullets there.

EB: Did you get any idea of how they picked people, how they—why they were doing this?

PO: Um, I don't know, I couldn't know that, but it was ordered. It was ordered by [Chukwuemeka Odumegwu] Ojukwu and everyone. So, I think that what happened is that the Biafrans gave them tough time, you know?

EB: Yeah.

PO: They really gave them tough time. They could not finish it very easily. They are doing the bombing and everything. So, when eventually they entered Asaba, they started massacring as justice.

EB: So, do you think—

PO: If we had given them (inaudible) they wouldn't have done something like that, but it was very unfortunate. We are not soldiers now. We are not soldiers. Soldiers came from the East, and they thought (inaudible).

EB: When they were doing these killings with people, digging the grave, was this just individual soldiers who chose to do this, or did you see—do you think orders were being given?

PO: I don't know what made them to start killing, maybe it was—we wondered if the commander asked them to finish every male child here. That was the command that was given.

FO: They were acting on instruction.

PO: They were acting on instruction, that any male child in this town must be finished. That was instruction they give them. And they tried to carry out the instruction, but unfortunately, our people (inaudible) and flee to the bush when they massacred people. That's why we are still alive today.

EB: Were you afraid you were going to be killed, too?

PO: (inaudible)

EB: Were you afraid you would be killed?

PO: No, I wasn't—I was not afraid. I didn't even know where (inaudible) soldiers now. After the killings, we were still mixing up with them. We would play with them.

EB: It seems strange. You could talk to the soldiers and—

PO: I was very young. I was very young at that time.

EB: So, they didn't hurt the younger children?

PO: No, no, no, no, they didn't. The only thing they did was harass our women. They harassed, they raped, they did a lot of things to them. But for the boys, we became friendly with them. (inaudible)

EB: What about girls? Did they hurt or attack or rape girls?

PO: Yes, (inaudible) they raped, they attacked, they raped them now. Do you know what I'm saying? It was terrible. Girls or women, they were raped, that's right.

EB: Are they young girls?

PO: Not young girls, old. Not younger, old, as long as they are women. Killed everything, they were dead, you know? Burnt down brick houses like this, looted property, you know. Everything, you know?

EB: So you came back after 1968, after the second operation.

PO: Mm-hm.

EB: You—were you—you came back and settled and rebuilt?

PO: I came back and settled down some. Schools resumed, so we started life again. So, everybody who was outside came back. Some of the schools resumed, some did not resume. But some of us (inaudible) some of us did not (inaudible) had to break, had to break about three years, you know? And before going back to school, then school started again in 1969 at St. Patrick's.

EB: So you've lived in Asaba every since?

PO: Yes, I lived in Asaba. Yeah, over there.

EB: How do you feel now? Do you feel bitter, angry? How do you feel about what happened?

PO: It's a long time. It's a long time now, so it's already forgotten. You cannot repeat or remember something like that every day. It's already about—it's about forty years, now.

EB: Yeah. What do you think about the idea of a memorial, or a building or something? What do you think would be the right thing to do?

PO: Um, anything—like, a cenotaph would be okay. Like a cenotaph, it would be okay. Like building a hospital or something, that people will go there and benefit and receive free treatment. So it's not something they would pay for. Pay for having good hospitals, okay. That way, people will go there for treatment (inaudible).

EB: What do you think about the idea of, uh, exhuming the bodies, of going to the mass grave?

PO: Well, why should we exhume them now? I don't think it is—I don't think it's wise to exhume the dead bodies, exhume the corpses now. I'm not of the opinion—I would not be happy to exhume them. They should remain there. You understand me?

EB: Uh-huh.

PO: (inaudible) and we still remember that this is where they are buried, and they are there.

EB: There seems to be some disagreement about that. Some people want—

PO: Some people want them exhumed?

EB: Exhumed, yes.

PO: But personally, I don't want them exhumed. That's personal opinion.

EB: Yeah.

PO: I don't want them exhumed.

EB: Do you think it's at all useful as proof, proof that this happened, to see the bodies?

PO: If you exhume and you put them back, no problem. But I know that the last time the people came to celebrate, we were not around (inaudible). Leave them to remain there, there's no problem.

EB: Yeah.

PO: Yeah.

EB: Anything else? Thank you, thank you very much.

PO: I'm grateful.

EB: I appreciate it.

PO: All right, uh-huh.

End of interview