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Medua Chuma Uraih oral history interview by S. Elizabeth Bird and Fraser Ottanelli, December 13, 2009

Medua Chuma Uraih (Interviewee)

S. Elizabeth Bird (Interviewer)

Fraser M. Ottanelli (Interviewer)

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Elizabeth Bird: All right, this is Sunday, December 13 [2009]. This is Elizabeth Bird with Fraser Ottanelli, and we are interviewing Mr. Medua Chuma Uraih.

Medua Chuma Uraih: Uraih.

Fraser Ottanelli: In Asaba.

EB: In Asaba.

MU: In Asaba.

EB: All right. Well, we'd like to start just by talking a little bit about you and your family before the war: who was in the family, how did you live, what did your father do—just setting the scene.

MU: My father was a contractor and he was teaming, kind of—before the pogrom came up, 1966, he has to—some of us were in secondary school down south, like me, I was at St. Patrick's College Asaba here, where I attended my secondary school. I did my secondary school career there. Then, unfortunately, the pogrom came up in nineteen—bit of a family—with her mother. When the crisis came up, 1966, they have to run down

home, and they were home. Most of us that are coming now from—I left St. Patrick's school [in] 1966. They came back then. By sixty-seven [1967], the war started in earnest. All of us, we are down home. And with the war, we started managing or praying to look if we can survive. Eventually, on Wednesday, fourth of October, the war came to Asaba.

When the war came to Asaba, we were all collected from the house to St. Patrick's College, where we all camped. The soldiers by then were lodging there. Then, on the seventh, they told us that the whole town was all right, that we should go back. We came back to Asaba, Asaba town, stayed till around twelve o'clock. (inaudible) have started shooting everywhere. Then some—my father and some group said that we should go out and welcome the soldiers. So we all went out, started singing, dancing, welcoming the soldiers: till we got to a certain point along the Nnebisi Road, where we met some group of soldiers who said no, that this is not a reason, that there are many men. Parked us to the corner, separated us, the women to one side, and all the men from seven years old and above before somebody can say no, that they should bring out the little kids. They took us to certain quarters and they eventually—the man was a captain, though he's late now, (inaudible). He ordered them to start shooting us, and they started shooting us at Ogbeosowa there. (inaudible)

EB: So you were—you'd gone to that place and you were sitting down waiting to see what happened, or—?

MU: We're all standing.

EB: Standing?

MU: When they started selecting us, we refused, and they starting bullying, pumping in bullets into us. Eventually, I was shot on the pelvis region.

EB: And then, what do you remember after that?

MU: After that, I jumped out; most of us jumped out. There's a brother I met inside the bush. I presume you must have interviewed him, Mr. Christopher Mkpayah.¹ He led me,

¹Christopher Mkpayah was also interviewed for the Asaba Memorial Oral History Project, DOI: A34-00012.

held me, till we got off on foot. We trekked the whole seven miles to Ibusa that night. In the middle—we got to Ibusa around 5:30, in the hours of the morning on Sunday of eighth. And that was where we stayed. I got my first aid. The first aid I got was just what would have been pressed on the wound and nothing again till after a week, where I got—I came to the Red Cross, and they started giving me treatment.

EB: Go back to that moment when you were—first of all, why did—how did your father know that you needed to go out and welcome the troops? Why was that—how was that decision made?

MU: A friend of his called him—that's Mr. Okowo—called him, because both of them are very close. Then they went and called another man. But the unfortunate part is that all the natives who were gathered at our own house, none of them was touched. They were all safe because there was a godly captain there in the name of Mathias. After the war, I haven't seen him, I haven't heard of him, but he gathered all of them. They asked them to wait and none of them was shot.

EB: So this Captain Mathias, he was one of the federal troops?

MU: He was one of the federal troops.

EB: And he took care of the people—

MU: He took care of the people who were camped in our house. But eventually, we went to another part of the town, and all the people who were gathered from that part of the town were the people that were led to the slaughterhouse.

EB: So who was with you, the people that left the house and went to the town? Who, exactly? Describe who was everybody with you—your family.

MU: In my family?

EB: Yeah.

MU: In my family, we were my father, my senior brother, my other brother—actually, all of us in the family went, all of us, the whole thirteen of us, including our father and

mother. It was there they separated our father—our mother, with the little ones; they brought them out. Then, myself, Ifeanyi², my senior brother, my other brother, and my father went to the shooting. We went to the shooting.

EB: What were the name—what was your father's name?

MU: My father's name, Robert Chuma Uraih.

EB: Robert.

MU: Robert.

EB: Robert, okay. And your senior brother's name?

MU: Paul.

EB: Paul.

MU: Chike Uraih.

EB: And then, so he was the senior brother?

MU: He was my (inaudible).

EB: Then there was you?

MU: Yeah, and then my other brother, Emma Chuma Uraih.

²Ifeanyi “Ify” Uraih was also interviewed for the Asaba Memorial Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is A34-00003.

EB: Okay.

MU: That one was killed during the war, during the crisis.

EB: And then you.

MU: Myself, I was shot.

EB: Yeah. And then Ify was your next brother?

MU: Ify was the next person, yeah.

EB: Ify has explained that one of your brother—your father and your brother were killed in the—

MU: Yeah, my two brothers and my father were killed in the war.

EB: So this would be Paul, your father—

MU: Paul and Emma.

EB: And Emma.

MU: Yes.

EB: Emma was younger than you or older?

MU: No, we are the same age.

EB: Same age.

MU: Same age, yeah.

EB: So, what did you see of the shooting, of what happened to them? Did you witness the actual shooting of your father and your brothers?

MU: When they dragged them out, my older brother Emma was the one I saw when they shot him—when they shot him. The four of us laid down and they started shooting sporadically on us without looking.

EB: You didn't see Paul?

MU: I didn't see Paul, but I heard his voice. You know, we are so many.

EB: Yes.

MU: Almost half of the town were there.

EB: And your father, did you see him?

MU: My father—I never saw him when he was shot, really. But it was when I came back from Ibusa, my mother said—it was my mother who went and brought him back and buried him.

EB: Yeah. Did she also find your brothers, or—

MU: She never found my brothers, really, because they were buried in the mass grave.

EB: When—you left with Christopher? And you went to—

MU: Ibusa.

EB: To Ibusa. And he said you went to St. Brigid's? No? No, you went to Ibusa.

MU: Ibusa town.

EB: Ibusa.

MU: Ibusa town.

EB: How long were you there before—

MU: Before we came back. When we got to Ibusa—really, it was on that eighth, Sunday, that the federal troops came to Ibusa, came looking for (inaudible) to destroy their houses. Then, all of us—again with the hope—noticing the idea that they have come to kill people, we run into the bush. We were in the bush for about a week before we came out. And I started coming back to Asaba where I got the treatment—where I got my first treatment.

EB: And you were with Christopher all that time?

MU: I was with Christopher all along.

EB: Then, after you came back to Asaba, what did you find? What was here when you came back?

MU: When I came back—when we came back to Asaba, the whole place was just a godforsaken town, because everybody—most people were not there. Most of the houses were burnt, were burnt down. Then, the only thing you see, just a little people going about here and there, as if the whole town was on holiday somewhere. Which later, they came—life started coming—there was no one left in the town, only soldiers. Only soldiers occupying most of the houses, really, even our own house; the downstairs were occupied by soldiers.

EB: How long did they stay there?

MU: They stayed there for a period of six weeks before they moved to the barracks.

EB: So that must have been—for you and your family—these are the people that had killed your family, and they're in your house.

MU: Uh-huh.

EB: What was that like?

MU: Excuse me?

EB: What was—how did that feel? What was that—how were the family able to cope—

MU: To cope.

EB: —with having them there?

MU: Um, well, I would say by the grace of God, really. We started—because my mother started getting through the trauma. And then we started coming back. She started relaxing and started feeling very distant. Her brothers helped us by supplying some food stuffs. And then later, most of us who were—because at that time, I wasn't sitting, I wasn't; but getting around, I forced myself to get up. We were bringing in, getting before the second occasion happened again in 1968.

EB: What happened then? Can you talk about that?

MU: Nineteen sixty-eight: all of the sudden they started shooting. There was, because—I think Biafran people sighted Nigerians. If you look across the river, you'll see a town. From there, they sighted Nigerian soldiers moving around (inaudible), killing some of them. The people went back (inaudible) bullets (inaudible) and they stay in town. Then they fled the whole town to St. Patrick's College, and that was on the twentieth of March.

EB: So this was long after the federal troops had left.

MU: No. The federal troops, they are still there.

EB: They're still in Asaba?

MU: Yes.

EB: Okay.

MU: They led everybody from Asaba to the school. That was the second slaughter.

EB: And then what—

MU: The second incident—massacre—which took place in Asaba. And it was from there most of us now got determined and left through the bush to Lagos.

EB: So that was in March of nineteen six—

MU: Nineteen sixty-eight.

EB: Nineteen sixty-eight. And they took, again, a lot of people to St. Patrick's College?

MU: To St. Patrick's, and camped us there. The whole town, because—the whole town, we are moved to St. Patrick's. Only soldiers remain in town.

EB: Just men—men, women, children? Everybody? Or just—

MU: No, men, women, children were taken to St. Patrick's. Soldiers were only—it was only soldiers in town. There's no other person. That means they were having field day, where anybody they see there, they shoot.

EB: So they again massacred—people were gathered at St. Patrick's and they massacred —

MU: No, they never massacred. Those who were massacred were those who remained in town.

EB: I see. I see. So those who left were safe, but those who—

MU: Those who left were safe, yeah.

EB: Remained in town were killed.

MU: Mm-hm.

EB: Do you know—have you any idea how many people died in that?

MU: In the crisis?

EB: Yeah.

FO: In the second one.

EB: In nineteen sixty-eight.

MU: In the second one?

EB: Yes.

MU: In the second one, I don't really have a number because I left. I left from there to Lagos, so I couldn't have any idea what really transpired after.

EB: So you went straight from St. Patrick's to Lagos?

MU: From two weeks—two weeks after we were taken to St. Patrick's, I found my way from Aboh to Lagos, where I stayed and started up a job.

EB: You were just alone then?

MU: Huh?

EB: Were you alone, or with other people?

MU: No, I was alone. Okay, those that left, later they come.

EB: Yeah.

MU: Um, we are four.

EB: Four.

MU: Yeah.

EB: So you decided you needed to go and you wanted to get back?

MU: I wanted to—we decided to leave, to come look for something (inaudible).

EB: If we could again go back to October 6 and 7, when you heard that the federal troops were coming, were arriving, what was the general mood? Were people pleased to hear the federal troops were coming, or how—?

MU: When they were coming, because they were shooting all along—the whole town was in chaos. Some people ran across the Niger [River]; some of us who never went there, going across, remained. So when our houses, when they came in—when our houses and—you know, when they get to the house, they push the door open and they start picking up, looting anything that they might see, because with soldiers, everything is booty.

EB: Did you know about what had happened on December 6? We heard—at the time, we heard that people, some people, were part of another killing that took place outside the—two, actually—the police station on October 6. We heard people—

MU: October 6.

EB: Yeah, and we were told that there were a large number of people gathered who were also killed by the soldiers. Had you heard anything about that?

MU: Yes. Yes. Unfortunately, the very place where it happened, a house has been built there. The house has been built there, because they brought out the people when—they ask you to dig your grave. After digging, the person who jumps in, they shoot the person, asked the other person to cover. So that was how they eliminated people there, how they killed.

FO: The one by the soccer field?

EB: Was this the soccer field, near the soccer field?

MU: Near the soccer—

EB: Near the soccer field.

MU: There's a big house down in there now—I wonder why, because nobody's putting any regards to the human beings that were lost there.

EB: So that killing that happened at the soccer field was the day before?

MU: On the sixth.

EB: On the sixth.

MU: Yes.

EB: And at the time, did you know about that? Did you know what was happening?

MU: No. We never knew what was happening there, but we were told later. Because it's—you know, the situation—at times, which it plays out—with the situation, many people ran. Many people stayed indoors. That one—it's only stories we started hearing, then you run very far to see what actually happened. So when we got there, we saw everything: what really transpired there, and how people were recovering. Our people don't agree we are recovering.

EB: So you had people tell you about that?

MU: Some people, who are witnesses to that, testified about it.

EB: So, on October 7, when you all left the house to—on the parade through to—

MU: On the parade to Ibusa.

EB: What were you thinking at that time? Were you thinking something terrible was going to happen?

MU: No, we never thought anything terrible was going to happen because, really, what they told us is—when we got to the police station here, people from (inaudible), people from these other quarters, all of us, they said that we should leave town. We should leave town, find somewhere to go, so that when they mop up the operations, we can come back. And that was what made us started moving, until we got to the market, there. They diverted us, started separating us from the—separating the women, the children, from the men.

EB: And that's when—after that, that's when they started shooting.

MU: Yeah, that was when they started shooting.

EB: Do you get—do you have any notion of who ordered the shooting or what—how it all started?

MU: Like I told you, the man who ordered the shooting, he is late now, because they kept us to know much about him. Ibrahim Taiwo.

EB: Ibra—his name was Ibra—

MU: Ibrahim Taiwo.

EB: Ibraham Ta—

MU: Ibrahim.

EB: Ibrahim.

MU: Taiwo. He was a captain by then.

EB: Could you spell his last name? T—

MU: T-a-i-w-o.

EB: So he was captain of the—

MU: He was captain that period.

EB: —of the group who—

MU: Uh-huh.

EB: So—

MU: And he was the person who ordered them to shoot us.

EB: Do you think he was taking orders from somebody else, or was that—

MU: He took orders from Murtala [Muhammed].

EB: From Murtala Muhammed?

MU: Yes. And eventually, they said that that was the same day that—because all of them were Northerners. You know, in the Nigerian army, by that time, you have most officers from this area, top-ranking officers, including Nzeogwu, Chukwuma, all of them now, they say they are Asaba. They are not from Asaba, except a very few. But all the rest, “Oh, they’re Asaba, Asaba.” So all of them had it in mind that they are coming to Asaba, where these people came from, and immediately they came here to destroy everything there.

EB: So this was—you believe this was planned, it wasn’t—it wasn’t—

MU: It was planned, yes—

EB: —on the spur of the moment or anything.

MU: No, it wasn’t on the spur of the moment; it was planned, this thing. Because, when they were shooting—it was later they started asking “Where’s Nzeogwu’s house? Where’s [Mike] Okwechime’s house?” We say, “No, they are not from here.” “Ah, but they said ‘Asaba.’” I say, “But they are not here, this is not their home.” And that was when they started feeling remorse about it, say that they thought that they are from Asaba.

EB: Those two names you just said, we’re trying to sort out all the—the people that they thought were in Asaba, but weren’t, they were the people they were holding responsible for the earlier coup?

MU: Which earlier?

EB: The two you said they’re looking for, which names? I’m sorry, we have so many names.

MU: The soldiers, they were looking for Nzeogwu.

EB: Ozagwu?

MU: Nzeogwu. Okwechime.

EB: Could you spell that one?

MU: O-k-w-u-e-c-h-i-a [*sic*].

EB: —i-a. Okay. And the first, do you know?

MU: [Albert] Okonkwo.

EB: Okonkwo, yeah.

MU: Okonkwo, [Conrad] Nwawo.

EB: Mwawo?

MU: Nwawo.

EB: M?

MU: N-w-a—

EB: N-w-a—

MU: —w-o.

EB: —w-o. And they were looking for them why?

MU: They were looking for their houses here in Asaba, so that they could go and destroy their houses and kill their people. But eventually they told them they are not from Asaba, that they are from the other side of the—they are from the hinterland. That was when they started feeling very (inaudible) about the whole thing.

EB: So you think some of the soldiers realized that they'd done something terrible.

MU: Some of the soldiers realized that they had done something terrible anyway.

EB: Yeah.

MU: Yeah. Like the man who bunked with us into my father's car was somebody who lived with us at Kano. Immediately, I saw him, I said, "Look at this one." You know, they had bullets to waste, as if they were—as if you gave a small kid some of this thing to waste. Because they were having bullets, they started doing whatever they like with bullets.

EB: What was the attitude of the soldiers when they were doing this? Did they seem angry, did they seem—

MU: You know, if you look at soldiers when they are doing things, they do things at the spur of the moment because, I think, in general, everywhere, they want to do it, because they want to do it. And just like children who would ask—a Nigerian soldier, you tell him go, their goal is go, destroy everything. When they come, they behave any way, really, until a higher officer will tell them to stop, is when they will stop. So it's just the same thing: anything they see is to be ravaged.

EB: Just again, for the record and for the tape, the reason that the soldiers were looking for these people, Nzeogwu, Okonkwo, Nwawo, what was the reason they were looking for them?

MU: They were top—Nzeogwu was the one who led the coup of 1966. They were dead now. They were desperate to know his place. And all of them know that he is from Asaba. One of the top officers in the Nigerian Army before—most of them were top officers in the Nigerian Army. And we endured all their madness because they were eliminating—all the Igbos talk, if they see any top officer, they kill, eventually, when they

came here with the hope that they would see him, because Nwawo is a strategist, really. When they came here, they were looking for him, thinking that he's from here.

EB: So this was revenge.

MU: It's all vendetta.

EB: (to FO) Fraser, do you have more questions?

(to MU) Anything—I'd just like to ask you a little bit. What do you think, now, should be done? What do you think, what would you like to see come out of this knowledge?

MU: Uh, though it's taking long, about forty-two years now, I think everything is just—everything has just come to pass that is now going to history, really. And we like it being on record that this is what happened to the town, at such and such a time. Like one, Emma Okocha, really, was writing about blood across the Niger.³ It's something again; but they never give most of the details, because he was a little kid back then.

EB: Um-hm. We know Emma well. We're his, or he was—

MU: He was a little kid then, really. But most of the accounts he gave, he was shying off from some certain points.

EB: I'm sorry? He—?

MU: He shied off from some certain points in the book, really. If it goes down to history, at least people will know, just like—what do they call it?—all the Jews were massacred. I think Asaba—the massacre of Asaba is the second place it happened in the world, if you look at it. Outside the (inaudible), that of Asaba seems to be the second place it really happened.

³Okocha, Emma. *Blood on the Niger: The First Black on Black Genocide*. New York: Triatlantic Books International, 2006.

EB: Yeah. Would you like to see a memorial, a museum, or something like that? Would that—

MU: Of course. We would like it, for posterity's sake.

EB: Yeah. Thank you. We really appreciate you taking the time, we're sorry it took so long to—

MU: It took so long, but something, someday to come.

EB: Do you think—this is a difficult question, but what do you think was the long-term impact on Asaba, of this killing, all of these killings, on the whole community? What do you think was the impact?

MU: At first, the young ones wanted to be wild. But with the help of the others, they started cooling down and started going about their business. And that just was the way it started weighing down over time. The efforts started pushing them down.

EB: Well, so many men were gone, so—

MU: Yeah.

EB: Yeah.

MU: Because right now, anybody coming in want to see if you want to—the people—the welcome they will get would be very drastic, because anybody coming with gun now to this town, the people will go down badly on him. And you'll see, it will make them remember the past, and everybody will go wild.

EB: Yeah. Thank you very much.

MU: Thank you.

End of interview