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Henry Ndozi Onyia, Felix P. C. Obi, Frank Obi Ogosi, and Emmanuel E. K. Onukwu oral history interview by Fraser Ottanelli, December 15, 2009

Henry Ndozi Onyia (Interviewee)

Fraser M. Ottanelli (Interviewer)

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[Transcriber's note: This interview was conducted with a group of four interviewees. At least three other persons are present in the background, and occasionally contribute to the conversation. There are several moments when multiple persons are speaking simultaneously.]

Fraser Ottanelli: First of all, I apologize, 'cause I need to start with some formalities. I need to introduce everybody who's in the room so that we have a record of it for the interview. Um, today is Tuesday, December 15 [2009]. We are in Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria. And we're conducting an interview. We have Chief—

Chief Henry Ndozi Onyia: Ndozi Onyia.

FO: Ndozi Onyia.

HO: Yes, that's me.

FO: We have Felix P.C. Obi, Frank Ogosi, and Emmanuel E.K. Onukwu.

Emmanuel Onukwu: Onukwu.

FO: Onukwu, okay. I apologize. In the room also with us—in addition to me, of course—is Elizabeth Bird. You wanna say the names?

Ify Uraih: Ify Uraih.¹

FO: Ify Uraih.

Onyeogali Okolie: Onyeogali Okolie.

FO: Okay, thank you very much. First of all, thank you very much for meeting with us today.

HO: You're welcome.

FO: Um, this is kind of an unusual way for us to do these interviews. We've never done a group interview before. So I will ask a general question, and then if you could, you know, take turns in answering it. First thing, if you could please describe, for each one of you individually, what life was like, what your family life was like, in the period leading up to the events of October of 1967. Can you describe your family, the members of the family, where you lived, your father's occupation?

(to HO) Would you like to begin?

HO: Okay. Well, as much as I can remember, before the Nigerian crisis, it was—I can trace back to fifteenth of January 1966, when we had the first military coup, the military takeover of the government. My father, the late Judge Onyia, was a minister under Balewa's government; he was a minister of the federal First Republic. And then after the coup, the government that was constitutionally set up was scrapped, and we had the first military government under General Ironsi. Then, another coup took place on the twenty-ninth of July that brought in General Gowon to power, who was a lieutenant. Ironsi was from the East, from Abia State, Umuahia.

Now, the fear of people living outside their own area started existing. So, there was the reprisal for the coup from the North, where many people from the South lost their lives.

¹Ify Uraih was also interviewed for the Asaba Memorial Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is A34-00003.

This led to the government of Ironsi to say that—I mean, Gowon—that military personnel and people should go back to their region of origin. We had four regions at that time: the Northern region, the Eastern region, the Mid-Western region, and the Western region. So, because of fear of people living outside their own area, they were advised that—they give direction that everybody should go back to their region of origin. This now created the opportunity, or draw a line—drew a line, of front—rear and front. So, the Easterners from the North, the Igbo-speaking people in the North, came home, while the Northern people from the South went back.

FO: Where was your family living at the time?

HO: My family was here in Asaba, here. Asaba had not much problems. But unfortunately, on the ninth of August, when the Biafran forces—that was sixty-seven [1967]. Was it sixty-seven [1967], or sixty-six [1966]?

All Interviewees: Sixty-seven [1967].

HO: Sixty-seven [1967]. When the Biafran forces crossed the Niger Bridge to the Mid-West area, which was not under the Biafran enclave, the Federal Troops, our forces, now started pushing back.

FO: Do you remember seeing the Biafrans when they first—

HO: We saw the Biafran forces cross the river at Asaba here, left Asaba, and continued right to Benin.

FO: And how did you feel when you saw the Biafran forces?

HO: Well—

Felix P.C. Obi: We knew that it was not—

HO: We thought—we didn't realize that there was any serious—it was a quiet affair.

FO: When they came through and kept on going?

HO: They just came and passed Asaba, no problem, until they got to Ore.

EO: The coup de grâce.

HO: When they got to Ore before the Federal forces, now—

FO: Now, who was in your family? Could you describe your family, your father and—

HO: Yeah, my father, my mother, my brothers were all—

FO: How many brothers did you have?

(interviewees laugh)

HO: I had over twenty. I had over twenty brothers, because my father had six wives. Yes.

FO: He had a lot of energy.

HO: Pardon?

FO: He had a lot of energy.

HO: Yes. He had over six wives. We were very many.

FO: And what did he—what did your father do?

HO: Well, he—

Frank Obi Ogosi: He was a minister.

HO: He was a minister, and at this time, he was made a commissioner under the military regime of David Ejoor in Benin City. But because of the crossing of the Biafran forces, the government of Mid-West came to a stop.

FO: Were you all living in the same—

HO: We were all living in the same house.

FO: So it was you, your father, his six—his wives—

HO: Well, and then some of us—some of my brothers were around. Some who were not around were either in Lagos or overseas.

FO: Oh, okay.

HO: So, there were no problems. But when the Federal forces now started pushing the—

FO: Okay, let's go down. Let's go down and talk about—let me ask everybody that first question, and then we'll start back with the arriving of the Federal forces.

HO: Okay.

FO: (to FPO) Could you describe, then, your family situation, and location leading up to the crisis in sixty-seven [1967]?

FPO: Yeah. My family lived in Benin, and that was where my father worked before the war. He was a teacher and a missionary. And my father had lived in Benin for over thirty years before the war started. And he had my mother as his wife, and had eleven of us—his children, you know, from my mother. I don't want to repeat what he [NO] has said about how the coup came up and other things that followed. But then, in August 1967—August 9, I think—

HO: Yes.

FPO: —to be precise. The Biafran troops crossed over from the East through Benin to Ore. When they got to Benin, they set up a new government for the Mid-West State, because Benin was the capitol of Mid-West State. They removed the military governor there, David Ejoor, and set up a new government with, um—

EO: Albert Okonkwo.

FPO: Albert. Major—Lieutenant Colonel Albert Okonkwo as—

EO: Military governor.

FPO: —military governor. This action of crossing and setting up a government with an Igbo-speaking governor sparked up some hostility among the natives, particularly in Benin: the Igbo-speaking people were the minority in that state. And already, both the civil service and other aspects of government were dominated by Igbo-speaking people before the war, before the crisis, most of whom were from Asaba. A lot of the Permanent Secretaries, top government officials and so on happened to be from Asaba. And this generated a lot of hostility. Now, when the Biafran troops crossed over, it was now like the nailing of the coffin of the indigents; that is, the non-Igbo-speaking people. It would now appear that they were more or less enslaved. And so, they were looking forward to an opportunity to get the Biafran troops and then the Igbo-speaking people out of Benin.

FO: Now, your family was in Asaba at this time?

FPO: My family was in Benin.

FO: Okay. And when did they start moving to Asaba?

FPO: Now, I was going—building up to that. Now, when we started noticing this hostility, it became obvious that one day something could happen, and then we decided to start moving our things. There were rumors. Suddenly, people who were your friends started behaving funny and all that. And so, the Biafran troops were stopped at Ore by the Federal Troops, and gradually it became obvious that they were now beginning to retreat. And as that happened, we, in Benin, started feeling unsafe. We started moving back home gradually. In fact, by the time the Federal Troops got to the outskirts of Benin, all the Biafran troops had moved out.

And then, suddenly, the natives started killing any Igbo-speaking person they found in Benin. And so, of course, we had to abandon the place and escape back to Asaba by whatever means. Some came back on foot, others by any other means—which meant, of course, that we had to abandon all our property, which gave rise to what they call “abandoned property syndrome” of the war. In fact, my father almost lost his life in Benin. He had his house in Benin. Having lived there for over thirty years, almost forty years, he had felt that he had become integrated in the society. But when they started killing, they even killed Igbo-speaking people married to their own people. And, at that point, everybody who was non-native had to find his way home. When we got back home —

FO: How did you travel from Benin back to Asaba?

FPO: Fortunately, we traveled by car. Like I said, many other people travelled by any other means, some by foot and so on. But a lot of people were killed in Benin, you know. When we got back to Asaba, the Biafran troops were still around, and so we felt a bit safe and protected by them. We started living in Asaba. But today you hear rumors that the Biafrans were having an upper hand, tomorrow we hear that things are turning the other way around, and so on. It continued like this for barely one month, and it came over that the Biafran troops were beginning to lose out.

But one incident had happened on August 9 to my family in Benin. It was that my senior brother—he’s late [deceased] now—Ogbueshi Michael Obi. He was a graduate of University of Ibadan in Nigeria, here. He was working as an economist with the Ministry of Economic Planning. And before that time, he had a Ford Foundation scholarship to study for his master’s degree at Syracuse University. On August 9, the Ford Foundation sent a vehicle to Benin to take him to Lagos. And it was that very day that the Biafran troops got into Benin. So, he left that morning and we believed that—for over a year, we didn’t hear from him. We didn’t know whether he arrived in the U.S., or whether he was killed while crossing from the Biafran end to the Nigerian end.

But when we got to Asaba, as I said, we were under this environment where we were not too sure what was going to happen, until the Federal Troops arrived in Asaba. At that time, the Biafran troops had all moved out. But while we were in Asaba, I joined the Biafran army. I was recruited into the Biafran army because of lack of something to do. When we were recruited, we were to be sent to Enugu for training. But about that time, there was confusion. The Biafran troops were withdrawing in confusion, and they kept telling us to hold on, that when it settles, we can now cross over to go to their military school in Enugu. That was in the East.

But at that point, some of us started asking questions. Should we cross over in this confusion? And of course, my father advised that we do not cross over, that it is better the devil you know than the angel you do not know. So, we decided to stay in Asaba, as a result of which we got caught up with the killings in Asaba. We happened to be living at Cable Point—

FO: Let me just—

FPO: Okay, okay—

FO: Before we start with that part, get the—

FPO: Okay, okay, all right.

FO: (to FOO) Could you please describe, then, your family and your family life, and the situation you were in leading up to—

FOO: Mine was a very large family. My father worked, or retired, as chief accountant for the Nigerian Railroads Corporation in Lagos. Most of my family settled in Lagos: mother, father. But I was in Enugu (inaudible). So I saw war, and there was no war worse. When it started, the Aburi Accord and everything, we were in Enugu. With the change of government and all of that, Ojukwu came down to Enugu as capital of Biafra, drawing the efforts of the Igbo-speaking people of Enugu. And suddenly, the war started.

FO: How old were you at the time?

FOO: Huh?

FO: How old were you? What was your age?

FOO: Uh, about forty—no, thirty-five, forty years. I was an accountant with a bank. So when the war started, we're coming down through Nsukka. Enugu was the last to fall. And then, we were the last set, last batch, to leave Enugu that day—I remember this— with Ojukwu, with the help of the air force and all of that. And then, this side of the East [was] still quiet. From Enugu, we had to cross to Asaba. Asaba was still very peaceful.

FO: Who were you traveling with? Were you alone or with your family?

FOO: Um, I was alone, because my family were already in Asaba, and I was a bachelor then. We fled from Enugu to Umuahia, because the Nigerian troops were moving from all fronts, and they moved the capitol of Biafra to Umuahia.

EO: The war itself.

FOO: The war itself. Yes, there, because the war was there before it came to Asaba. So, Umuahia was seriously fighting when I left, came to Asaba, by transport.

FO: When did you arrive in Asaba, approximately?

FOO: I do not remember.

FO: Around the end of September? This was before the massacre you arrived?

FOO: Before the massacre, well before the massacre. But when we came to Asaba, the Nigerian forces moved down and couldn't penetrate to Onitsha (inaudible). That was then when they decided to come through Lagos, Ibadan, Benin, to Asaba. So, when the war was hitting, those in the East saw war, but this side was very peaceful. And there were a lot of people leaving [to] go to their own region. I never saw so many people return. But those from the North of Nigeria who came to Western side were not getting through Biafra then. The bridge, Niger Bridge on the River Niger, was the only way for them to cross. But that place was heavily guarded by Biafran troops. So this ruled out—Nigerians now came through Benin coming down, but they couldn't. So, to counter them, Biafra now crossed into Asaba. It was a swift cross: [in] under three days they had gotten into Ore. There were marching to Lagos. And then, the war that was happening between Enugu, Opi and Nsukka, Nigeria now had to withdraw their ground troops to come down to Lagos. And then, there was sabotage there. And so the Biafrans arrived. So these people now met: Biafrans and Nigerians met at Ore.

FO: And that is when the retreats began.

FOO: That was when the war began, and they moved down—retreated.

FO: When you moved to Asaba, you moved to your family home?

FOO: Yes, I met my family and everybody at Asaba. [The city was] peaceful. And then, by the time this war now came into Asaba, I heard a rumor. And I started hearing the sound of the shelling, because we heard it, you know, the sounds of the small shells, sound of shell (inaudible) Biafrans. So by the time I came here and stayed here was when we started now hearing the small arms; we now knew that they were soldiers.

FO: You had heard it before.

FOO: Oh, yes, because these people, when they were shelling from afar you would know. Indiscriminate shelling. But by the time they came near, the bridge was there. I took to the ceiling.

FO: To hide.

FOO: To hide. But, uh, you know, hunger. For two, three, four days, no food. We were living on fruits. My parents went out, the aged ones. Some of the men took to the bush and then hid. So, from there when they entered, it was not a sight to threaten them. They came down and took to the bush.

FO: Let's hold off about that for a second, and then we'll talk.

EO: Yes.

FO: Let me move this [the microphone]. (to EB) Let me just ask—do you have enough battery? It tells you on the upper left-hand side.

Elizabeth Bird: (inaudible)

FO: Uh, just on the left—on the right.

EB: (inaudible)

FO: Uh, I don't know. Sixty minutes?

EB: I have thirty-one minutes.

(interviewees murmuring in Igbo)

FO: I'm sorry. Go ahead.

EO: Well, by January 1966, when the military coup took place, I was a student at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, a final year student. We graduated in June 1966. So, after the graduation, I returned to Asaba, my home, and then got an appointment, a teaching appointment at St. Patrick's College, Asaba. There, my father, a retired head postmaster of (inaudible) and my mother and the other wives—he had three wives. It was during that period, when I was teaching at SPC, that—by 1967, when the issue of North and South dichotomy and then the coups upon coups out of Gowon and all those ones that took place, then, really, now the war came of the movement, after the declaration of police action. Then they started this movement. I was in Asaba by October—that was October 6, I was in Asaba—when the Nigerian troops now have crossed over, have left Benin, moving to Asaba. Because every other place—

FO: So you were teaching at St. Patrick's?

EO: Yeah, College, yes.

FO: Okay, and so all your family was here?

EO: Yes, my father and my mother, they were all here. On that October 6, we now—the Federal Troops now have moved, have left Benin, now moving to Asaba with all the forces at their command.

FO: Let me ask you something, and this is a question—and at this point, we've kind of set the stage. You were all in Asaba at the same time, so—

FOO: Yes.

EO: Yes.

FO: And now you're experiencing—you're going through the same experience all together, from different perspectives. So, please feel free to cut in. This is a story with many voices. We've heard, of course, that some of the killings began on the sixth.

HO: Yes.

FO: That's the day before the massacre?

EO: Before the massacre, yes.

FO: The killings close to the police station and next to the soccer stadium, they were the first groups of people being killed. Do you have any recollections? Did you witness any of these events, or know anyone who was caught up in these early killings on the sixth?

FOO: Yes.

FPO: Myself.

FOO: Like I said, when Nigerian troops started marching from Benin and I took to the ceiling, I started hearing the small firing. This time it was not shelling: shelling was from far, and small arms was in a radius. I was still in Asaba, and I took to the ceiling of my building. Soldiers now started entering, shooting at random, because they were suspecting everybody. But right then, they couldn't cross to—

EO: Onitsha.

FOO: —Onitsha, because of the bridge.

FPO: The bridge had been destroyed.

FOO: The bridge was an anchor. But when they now pushed and wanted to cross, they blew it.

FO: But what day was the bridge blown up? Was it on the—

FPO: On the sixth.

EO: On the sixth.

FOO: The fifth or sixth.

EO: On the sixth.

FPO: On the sixth.

EO: On the sixth.

HO: No, the seventh; it was the next morning.

FOO: The next morning when they came in—

HO: Because our people were able to move out on the sixth.

FPO: I thought it was later that evening.

EO: No, no, it was on the sixth—

FPO: On the sixth evening.

EO: Because I—

FOO: Well, fifth, sixth, seventh—

EO: I found it difficult to go by the road, then I now joined a canoe and we followed it across to Onitsha.

FPO: The evening. On the evening of the sixth—

EO: Yes.

FPO: —we heard the *boom!* at my place. We didn't know what the noise was.

FOO: Happened.

FO: And you lived on Cable Point, right?

FPO: We lived on Cable Point, just by the riverside.

EO: And I lived by Cable Point, too.

FOO: When (inaudible), everybody from Asaba who wanted to cross must pass through the bridge, or you would take the canoes.

EO: (inaudible)

FOO: (inaudible) And then immediately that bridge was blown. There was no escape route through there.

FPO: Same time.

FOO: And these people [the soldiers] cannot cross with their heavy equipment and all that. But the natives—those who were able to cross, who know the road—took to the boats and then run into Oko, in the bush to Oko.

FO: Did you say you witnessed some of the killings on the sixth?

HO: Yes, by my own account.

FPO: I did.

HO: I lived at Cable Point. On the sixth, when the Federal troops overran Asaba, we joined the crowd who wanted to flee to Onitsha. When we got to the textile mill route, I changed my mind. I said, "I will not cross to Onitsha." I started coming towards Asaba with my other brothers. So, we started to come back to Asaba instead of crossing to Biafra. So, by the time we got to Federal College Junction—what you now know as Federal College Junction—on the sixth evening, the whole Asaba people had already crossed, moved beyond that.

FOO: The women.

HO: Mostly women and children. So we could not continue moving back to Asaba (inaudible). We now had to divert, because the whole place was quiet, no human beings, nobody anymore. So we were afraid. We now got into the small bush behind—just by the Federal College. We hid there, behind the (inaudible) hospital. That was when we spent the night. The following morning—

FO: Who were you with?

HO: My brothers, who were over seven [in number], and other friends. So the following morning, on the seventh, we now took a decision whether to be killed in the bush and our family would not be able to know whether we are alive or dead. We decided to come out to the main road to that place you have (inaudible), Federal College Junction. We came out there, surrendered to the soldiers, Federal troop, the soldiers. They now took us on that route to a traffic light. We didn't know where they were taking us to. We were only obeying orders. So they took us to the police station. When we got to the police station there, (inaudible), they asked us to pull our trousers. They were trying to identify whether we were Biafran soldiers. Some of our people who joined the Biafran forces did not remember to pull out their togs. You know, the PT blue and white uniform they use for physical—whatever you call it.

FOO: Training.

HO: For training. So when they identified them as members of the Biafran armed forces, they shot them. I was watching them.

FO: How many people did you see them kill?

HO: Oh! It was uncountable.

FPO: You can't count them.

FOO: You can't count them.

HO: Even when you are not—if they didn't find any tog on you, they look at your feet and say, "You! You, you!"

FPO: Or they look at—

HO: They use the—

FPO: They look at the heel—

HO: Yes.

FPO: Of your foot—

HO: To know whether your (inaudible)—

FPO: To see if this mark was made by boot, soldier's boot.

HO: Sometimes, if you are lucky, they will just pick you out of the crowd, within the crowd. "You!" You put your foot out. "You!" (inaudible) Hit you on the head, you see blood gushing out, they'll shoot you down.

FO: Did you see these people that were shot being buried afterwards? Did they bury them?

FOO: No, no, no. There was no burial.

HO: We are afraid we would be killed, too.

FOO: There was litter everywhere.

HO: So we were there crying. We were so afraid, until night when one major, Major [Ibrahim] Taiwo (inaudible)—he died when they killed—he died with Murtala Mohammed, Major Taiwo. So, Taiwo now started talking to us, [saying] that since they left Benin, they have no strong confrontation. But when they got to Asaba, they started having fights [and said] that we should greet the Federal forces. We should go out, call out our people to welcome them.

FO: This would be on the seventh?

FPO: On the sixth.

HO: No, that was the sixth. On the sixth.

FOO: The seventh.

HO: No, seventh, sorry.

FOO: That was on the seventh.

HO: Sixth, we slept in the bush. This time, seventh.

FOO: Seventh.

FO: So this is the seventh already?

FOO: Yes.

FO: (to FPO) Now, you said you witnessed some killings on the sixth.

FPO: Yes, I did.

FOO: Yes, that's seventh.

FPO: I did, on the sixth. Like I said, we used to gather together, young people. I had just gone into University of Ibadan, but we couldn't continue. So, we used to gather together. It was the same group that had joined the army and was disrupting. So we used to gather together in the house of the Onyia family, 'cause that was like a central point to (inaudible). Then, on the sixth, the rumor was very strong that the Federal troops were approaching Asaba. Then, about 3:00 PM, suddenly we heard some shelling on the town. (makes sound effect) Like that. Ah! So, there was no argument. Is it Biafran troops that are shelling, or is it the Federal troops? When we meet a Biafran soldier retreating, we're told, "No, it's our troops." You know?

EO: Our men.

FPO: "It's our men." This continued until suddenly a shell fell close to us, and of course the pellets just scattered. At that point, everybody said, "No, this is war." And we started moving. Then, suddenly, another shell fell. (makes sound effect) And there was this—our friend, who was in our group, (inaudible). He came from—he was living in Ibadan: a young boy like us, you know. The next thing—he was wearing a white shirt and black trousers. Next thing, he just fell. We thought maybe he fell out of fright, or whatever. But, in any case, we were all running. It was later that they turned his body around. At the back there was just one point of blood; but when they turned him around, when I saw him the next day, the whole stomach entrails had moved out, you know. Of course, he died on that very spot. And I was just imagining how we were together just moments ago, and then the very next moment, from nowhere—because we didn't see the people shooting. This thing was coming from the air.

EO: Sporadic.

FPO: And he was dead. That was the very first casualty I saw with my naked eyes that was very, very close to me.

FO: Did you witness on the sixth any people being killed by Federal troops?

FPO: Okay. On the sixth, what happened—

FO: This is the day before the march.

FPO: Uh-huh. On the sixth, when our friend died, we all now started escaping. I went home to our house in Cable Point. Then my father ordered that none of us should move out of here, the premises. Several other relations came in there. So, I didn't see any other person who was killed on that day. But that was only Friday, as I remember. On Saturday and Sunday morning, I now had the misfortune of seeing as many heaps of dead bodies as possible.

FO: This would have been as a result of the—this is the massacre?

FPO: The massacre.

FOO: The massacre. I will tell you.

FO: Let me just get to the sixth again. Yes, you said you had something—

FOO: On the fifth, the heavy shells started falling on Asaba; on the sixth, the sporadic shooting, small firearms. That was when I took to the ceiling. Then, there was killing and burning, setting fire on the—

FPO: Houses.

FOO: Houses. I would say I was privileged to be saved because of one colonel, (inaudible), who attended SPC.

FO: So, this was a Nigerian colonel.

FOO: Yes, a Nigerian soldier. We were classmates.

FPO: Who attended SPC in Asaba.

FOO: SPC. And he was—in his final year, the year before his final year—

FO: He was from Asaba?

FOO: No, from Benin. He was living in our father's house.

EO: When he was a student.

FOO: When he was a student. We were revising our final exams in the same room, because his senior brother was a teacher in SPC. So, the closeness—he was—Reuben. Now he was a colonel in the Nigerian army.

HO: No, he was a major.

FPO: He was a major.

FOO: He was a major.

EO: He was a major by that time.

FOO: So, we now came (inaudible) our house for protection. But my father was afraid to reveal where we are, because of the deaths: so many people had been killed in the village shooting. So, on the sixth, he posted some soldiers to the house to protect the women. Then, on the sixth, at about two o'clock—one, two, three o'clock—there was this announcement by the elders from the town, different villages. "You will now come out, both men, women, and everyone." And they're shouting, "One Nigeria!"

FO: This would be on the seventh, the next day.

FOO: That's the next day, the seventh, because I came in on the sixth.

EO: On the sixth.

FO: Do you have recollections of the sixth, then?

EO: Yes. On the sixth, I was in my house with Sydney Asiodu, who was killed; he's the senior brother [of Chief Philip Asiodu]. John (inaudible). They were in my house, discussing about why—my father was lecturing them on the World Wars and the German (inaudible). They were all interested in listening to my father's story about the war and all this. They started shelling everywhere. By our own place, towards the River Niger, you could see fire from these arms coming down. So, all of them now—everybody decided to find his way. So, Sydney left, his [FOO] brother left, and then my wife-to-be also left. Then my mother told me that she can't withstand it, so because of that, then I now took her over on [a boat with] an outboard engine across. Of course, by that time the bridge had already been—

FO: So, you crossed over to the east.

EO: I crossed over to Biafra.

FO: Who did you cross over with?

EO: I crossed over with my mother.

FO: With your mother.

EO: Yes.

FO: Sydney Asiodu stayed behind, of course.

EO: He stayed behind.

FO: All right. Now we're on the morning of the seventh.

FOO: On the seventh, the—(gestures)

FPO: Town crier.

FOO: The town crier, appealing to everybody to now come out.

HO: And welcome the Federal forces.

FOO: And welcome the Federal troops.

FO: You all heard it? You all heard the town—

HO: Yes.

FOO: I heard it. I was on top.

FPO: I didn't hear.

FOO: "All everybody, come out! One Nigeria!" They started shouting, "One Nigeria!" So, the women—mostly—the men, and everybody, all the people, don our native white clothes, and then, clapping and dancing. "One Nigeria!"

FO: Did you start out from the same—all of you, from the same place?

FOO: No, from different places.

FO: Where did the four of you start out from?

FPO: (to NO) Did you dance "One Nigeria"?

HO: Um—

FOO: I did not dance. I was on top of the ceiling. But my family, everybody went.

FPO: I did not dance.

HO: I didn't dance.

FO: (to EO) Did you dance?

EO: No.

FO: Oh, you were on the other side.

FOO: If we danced, we would not be alive today. Those who danced—

FPO: Most of them.

FOO: Ninety to 95 percent of the males did not come back.

FO: So, you [FOO] stayed up in the ceiling. (to FPO) But what did you do?

FPO: My father asked us to remain in the house.

FOO: They were on the outskirts of the town.

FPO: The town criers don't come that way.

FOO: They don't come that way. We are right inside the village.

FPO: So, we didn't get the message that people should come out and dance.

FO: (to NO) What about you?

HO: Almost the same thing. We didn't hear this information. We heard, like I said before I stopped, Major Taiwo advise that we should come out to welcome the Federal forces the next day. But that next day, I didn't come out. We stayed in our family house. We were just lucky that they did not come there. After the whole incident, somebody came to tell us that because of some political reasons, we didn't go to welcome, that they are accusing us, and we didn't go to welcome the Federal forces. We now left to go and look for them. It was then that we were told of the massacre, that the massacre took place.

FO: Now, did any of you hear—you, of course, were not in the square where the massacre took place.

FOO: That's what I'm saying. When the town crier started crying, everybody started coming out. There were many males. But one, because I have seen, I have tasted the war in Biafra before crossing, and I was on top of the ceiling. My father has told the soldiers there that there was no other person [in the house], that that was all of the people, to protect us. I did not come down. But as they were passing, discussing it, I could hear. In the roof, you would see people going. And then, you would still be having the feel of the small sporadic shooting, the bullets with their whistling sound.

FPO: (inaudible)

FOO: Yes, so many people killed. So, from there, they gathered everybody around our district to a point. From there, the announcer separated the people: women out to one side, small children pass to one side. Then, (gestures) they started firing the—

FO: Machine guns.

FOO: Not shells this time.

HO: Machine guns.

FOO: Machine guns. I would say about four or five. (inaudible) and then opened fire.

FO: Could you hear from where you were?

FOO: Oh, yes. (gestures) Heaps of human beings. Those who survived were those that fell, who were laying on the ground; those others fell on them.

HO: Their bodies fell on them.

FOO: And they managed to escape. The next day, some are still living witnesses.

FO: Did any of you—you all stayed in hiding. None of you went to see where this massacre had taken place.

FPO: It was the next day.

FOO: After the massacre, the next day—I would say on the eighth, ninth, tenth—finally I escaped. Because after that day, we had no confidence in the Nigerian soldiers, we now decided to take to the bush. From there, I crossed to Biafra again.

HO: (pointing at camera) The lights.

FO: We're on batteries, so we're okay.

FOO: The next day, after that massacre, I managed to come down, put on women's apparel, and took to the bush: from there to—what's it called?—Achalla; from Achalla to Oko; and then I was ferried across by Biafran soldiers.

FO: To the east.

FOO: To the east again, to Biafra. And I stayed till the end of the war.

EO: But you experienced something.

FOO: Yes, I experienced—

FPO: What happened in my own case was on that seventh, after the massacres in the town, the soldiers now started moving—

FOO: Towards the bridge.

FPO: —all over Cable Point.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

FO: Do you mind starting—

FPO: Yeah. On the seventh, after the killings in the town—after the killings in the town, the soldiers now started moving further towards—

FOO: Toward Cable Point.

FPO: —Cable Point.

FOO: To the river.

FPO: And they were coming in groups. The first group came to our house and shouted that everybody should come out. They just shot sporadically into the house. Until after the war, you will see perforations in the wall and everything. Then, of course, we all came out with our hands up. Me and my immediate senior brother, the one he [EO] referred to before, we all were singled out as Biafran soldier suspects. And each time they came, my father would offer them money, and, uh—

FOO: They would reverse.

FPO: They would reverse and go away. This thing happened several times. On that seventh, one group came. They seemed to recognize me from Benin. He remembered—

they came from Benin; they left. But each time they came, something, like, kept telling them that I was a soldier. Because when they would leave my brother, they would drag me to shoot me. And indeed, on one occasion, they just came, they said, “Yes, you’re a soldier. Shoot him, kill him!” You know? The man cocked his gun, and as he was about to fire, the magazine just fell on the ground and the bullets scattered. So, as he was picking them up, slotting them back, one of the sergeants came and said, “What is happening here? What is happening here? I think you have been told to stop killing people. Haven’t you killed enough?” As of that time, we didn’t hear of all the massacre, because we were in Cable Point. We didn’t hear of all the massacre that had happened in town. But he shouted at them. He said, “I told you people to stop killing, haven’t you killed enough?” Okay!

FO: This was a Nigerian officer?

FPO: A Nigerian officer.

HO: A Nigerian officer.

FOO: A Nigerian officer.

FPO: A Nigerian officer. So—

FOO: The Biafrans have crossed, they’ve all crossed.

FPO: But some of them were hiding in the bush, in the cemetery, because our house was close to the cemetery. Some of them went—some of them dug some trenches in the cemetery from where they were firing on the Federal troops.

FO: These would be Biafran soldiers?

FPO: Biafran soldiers. You know. So, that was what made them suspect that there must be Biafran soldiers in our house. So that was the nearest escape I had. And after that, my father advised that in the morning—which was Sunday morning—I should try and go to our house in Umuaji—

FOO: In the town.

EO: On the other side of town.

FPO: In the town. That it might be safer there. We didn't know what happened. And so, because it was on a Sunday morning, I now carried my prayer book, had my rosary, and as if I was going to church, I took off. As I was going, I was seeing dead bodies, singles, here and there, until I got to the church premises. And there, in front of the church, I saw bodies, including Brother Ignatius.

EO: Late Brother Ignatius.

FPO: Late Brother Ignatius. He was wearing—

FOO: (inaudible)

FPO: He was wearing his black soutane [cassock], was wearing his black soutane and he was just prostrate there. And you could see perforations, bullet perforations. So at that point, I said to myself, "Huh."

FO: Were you alone?

FPO: I was alone. I said to myself—I didn't see any human beings from my house to—except soldiers I saw around the post office. Because I took the cemetery route, which was behind that police station—

HO: Onyeobi Way.

EO: Onyeobi Way.

FPO: Uh-huh. Now Onyeobi Way. You know, I didn't see anybody except the soldiers I saw in the post office. They were trying to loot the post office because some of them had postal orders, money orders.

EO: (inaudible)

FPO: Uh-huh, you know. So when I saw that—

FOO: That was what we used in Biafra.

FPO: Uh, I said, “No, this church premises is not safe for me. Let me go to Umuaji.” I came out. And as I said, as I was going I did not see anybody, but bullets were flying—

FOO: (inaudible)

FPO: Flying over my head, in front of me, and so on. But I was seeing (inaudible). As soon as I turned 'round to the back of present day Delta Line, I saw a heap of dead bodies. That was one of the places they killed people. I could recognize some of them, including one of my uncles. Part of his face was removed by a bullet, but I could remember—I could recognize him because he was a tall, huge man. And he was on the heap. And because bullets were flying, I didn't want to take the side of the road, so as to not appear as if I was a soldier just coming out from the bush. And so I decided to climb on top of—

EO: Dead bodies.

FOO: Dead bodies.

FPO: Dead bodies. In the process, even some brain matter stained my leg. I remember trying to use sand to rub off blood and—you know.

FO: So you climbed over—

FPO: I climbed over—

FOO: Yes, a heap.

FPO: I climbed over.

FO: How high was this heap?

FPO: Um, it wasn't very high, just—

FOO: Maybe about four or five people.

FPO: Uh-huh, on top.

FO: Were there any soldiers immediately around?

FOO: No.

FPO: Nobody—

FOO: (inaudible)

FPO: Bullets, bullets. So, when I saw that, I said, "My God, where am I going to? Well, I might as well just die." But I continued. I got to Umuaji Square: dead bodies. Even dogs and so on were shot. There was no living soul.

FOO: Goats was there.

EO: The soldiers (inaudible).

FPO: Yes, yes. No living soul. So, I continued.

FOO: No men.

FPO: No living soul. I didn't see any human being.

FOO: They killed all the men.

FPO: By the time I got to our family house, the place was open. I was shouting, “Is anybody here, anybody here?” No soul, nothing. And I decided to continue to Umuaji, where my mother comes from. I passed through Umuezei Square, no soul. All this time, I had not seen one single human being alive.

FOO: And no smoke.

FPO: I was seeing dead bodies.

FOO: Because if they see any smoke, they know somebody is there cooking, they would see them.

FPO: So, I left Umuezei. As I was going towards Umuaji, I saw one soldier riding on a bicycle. As soon as he saw me, he shouted, “Who are you? Who are you? Where are you going to?” And I told him, I said, “Please—”

FOO: Church.

FPO: “I’m going to the church.” He said, “Church? Church? Didn’t you see all the people who have been killed? And you are coming out? Where have you been all this time?” I said, “Look, I was in Cable Point, in a house.” He said, “If you know where you are coming from, you better go back there, because when the soldiers see you, they will kill you. They will kill you! You better go back to where you—” So I said, “Thank you, sir.”

FO: This was a Nigerian soldier?

FPO: A Nigerian soldier, Sunday morning.

FOO: They were tired of killing then.

FPO: So, I now turned back. I now turned back. No, some of them were—

FOO: Still killing.

FPO: No, some of them were not—

FOO: (inaudible)

FPO: Not all of them, I'm sure—

EO: They were looting.

FPO: —involved themselves in the killing.

HO: One battalion did not kill.

FPO: You know? So, I turned back and now started going back. Then, by the time I got to Umuaji again, suddenly I saw smoke coming out of a compound. I happened to know the family, the Ojogwu family.

EO: Yes, Ojogwu, yes.

FPO: Father Ojogwu.

EO: (inaudible)

FOO: (inaudible)

FPO: Ah! So I said, "If there is smoke, then maybe there is some sign of life there." Then I rushed there. As soon as I got there, I saw over a hundred women sitting outside, because it was a fairly big compound. They were sitting outside. Each one of them was—

FOO: In a mournful position.

FPO: Mournful, or crying. So I entered the house. As soon as I entered the house, I saw Father Ojogwu. I said, “Papa, Papa, please, save me, save me, save me.” He told me, he said, “Look, Felix, I’m sorry, I cannot protect you.” I said, “You cannot?” He said, “Come and look at your cousin,” his son—

EO: Was that Paul?

HO: Jude.

EO: P.C.

FPO: No, not Paul, not Jude, P.C. He said, “Come and look at your cousin, I’m just trying to”—because the man retired as a Northern officer, a senior Northern officer. He said, “I’m just trying to extract some bullets from him.” He was using a knife, like a kitchen knife. I saw him, he was extracting bullets. The man was shot—the boy, then—was shot in the head and the arm and on the buttocks. I saw him doing that. He said, “Your other cousin, Simon, had been—”

FOO: Killed.

FPO: Killed. Along with one of—the wife was from Ishan. One of the wife’s nephews, who was living with them, that one was also killed. I said, “What? Killed?” So at that point, I gave up and said to him, I said, “Papa, please. I have tried to escape, but I’ve found that I cannot—I couldn’t make it. So, I’m trying to go back home to my father, but if I die on the way—”

FOO: Tell them.

FPO: “If they kill me on the way, tell them that I have tried.” At that point, I was prepared for the worst, and I was no longer afraid of death. So, I started going. This time, I didn’t take the road I came out from; that is a back [road], through the cemetery. I now decided to take the main road. And as soon as I got to the police station, I now saw the troops. So, at that point, my courage again failed me. So I said, “Okay, the best thing, let me just go and surrender myself. If they’re going to kill me, let them kill me. If they want to do whatever they want to do with me, let them go ahead and do it.”

So as I moved in, two people were just sitting and drinking pop. (EO laughs) They said, “Who are you?” I said, “Please, I am going home to my—” “What do you want here?” You know? When I looked at them, they were sitting on a corpse. The corpse had been drained by rain, it was swollen, and that was where—they used that as their seat. They were drinking pop. In fact, I was looking at them, I didn’t know whether I was dreaming or I was still in this world.

Then, suddenly I saw a young boy, a young soldier, coming out. He had some things of—tomatoes—in his hand. So I said, “Please, can you—I want to go to my house. Can you give me some cover?” He said, “Where is your house?” I said, “It’s just down there,” because it wasn’t too far from there, but like I said, my courage had failed me. So I said, “It’s just close by.” He said, “Okay,” and he started taking me. But at a point, you have to pass through a small bush, and when he got there, he himself wasn’t sure whether I was leading him into an ambush. And so he asked me, “Are you okay here?” I said, “Yes, that roof there is our house,” and then I went back.

My parents were surprised to see me. And they said, “Why’d you come back?” I said, “Look, what I saw”—because up till that time, they didn’t know about the massacre. I said, “What I saw—ah, Papa! I saw Mr. Ogu on a heap, and part of his face was—” He said, “Ogu?” I said, “Yes, Ogu. Yes,” because this was—he was huge, Ogu. He was wealthy, you know? He said, “This cannot be. If this is what happened, then—” I told him, I said, “Brother Ignatius, also.”

Fortunately for us, on that day, somebody came. One officer came with some soldiers, and then—a Nigerian officer was asking us whether there was any problem. And we said yes, that—that was on the eighth—that soldiers had been coming. So he said that we could keep a soldier to watch over us. They have told them to stop killing. So from that day, I never went out again, and we were there for about a week or so when somebody came and said that this (inaudible) was looking for me. We were very good friends. In fact, we were to join the army together, but my father did not allow me to go after passing the exam. My father did not sign off for me. So we were very good friends, and they said he was looking for me. Eventually I managed to see him, and weeks later he took me out of Asaba; he took me to Issele Uku, from Issele Uku I went to Onicha Ugbo (inaudible), and then finally ended up in Agbor.

But one of those people who stayed in our house on the sixth and decided to go home on the seventh was Andrew Juwah, who was a student in the University of Ibadan. It happened that that night—

FO: How do you spell his name? Andrew—

FPO: Andrew Juwah.

FO: How is that spelled?

FPO: J-u-w-a-h. He was a student of University of Ibadan. That night, as if he had a premonition, he kept crying and crying and crying. And in the morning, he said he was going back home. Everybody dissuaded him and told him, “Look, nothing has happened to us here yet. Why don’t you wait?” He kept saying, “No, I must go, I must go.” We heard that as he was approaching his home, the soldiers met him, and they shot him, and he died.

FO: Did you see him?

FPO: No, no, no, no. I didn’t see him. But his other brother, his other brother, Augustine Juwah, remained with us at least that day, and we did not—

FO: Did any of your family members see him dead?

FPO: See who?

FO: See him dead?

FPO: No, but his brother, eventually, because they buried him.

FO: So by the tenth, or at least within a couple of weeks of these events, three of you were gone from—had left Asaba?

FPO: Yeah.

FO: You had crossed over—(to HO) you remained in Asaba?

HO: Yes.

FO: Now, people have discussed and described the second operation, the one in March [1968].

FPO: I was not here.

FO: Did any one of you experience, when the population was moved over to St. Patrick's College, and there was another round of killing in Asaba? Were any of you here for that?

HO: Yeah. You see, I had a little idea, because I left Asaba very early in the morning. It was Easter—Sunday, Monday—after Easter, Monday.

IU: Easter Monday.

HO: Easter Monday, yeah. Yeah, so I took some people out of Asaba to Issele-Azagba. When I got to Okpanam, I saw, you know, flocks of Ibusa people. I said, "What is happening?" They said the Biafran forces—

FO: Had crossed over.

HO: Have crossed into—they invaded Asaba. (inaudible) So because of that fear—and on the eve, I was with Brother—

EO: Davis.

HO: No, Brother Roman.

EO: Brother Roman, at SPC.

HO: It was Brother Roman, the principal; he was the principal there. And he told me he would be going to Benin the following morning for a principals' conference. So this morning now, when I took these people away, when I saw that crowd from the influx of people from Okpanam in Ibusa from the bush, I decided not to come back to Asaba. So I went to Issele Uku and stopped to watch the development.

FO: Of what was going on.

HO: Yes. It was there I now heard that they came into this area again and started messing with people. So the (inaudible) people were now taken to SPC. And now, I came from Illah; my mother is from Illah. At this time, I have left Asaba. I now came from Illah, went to negotiate with the brigade commander, Godwin Ally, who was the brigade commander at that time in Asaba. I negotiated with him, and I took my members of my family who were at St. Patrick's College (inaudible) and took them out. (inaudible)

FO: Liz, do you have any questions before I move on?

FOO: The second killing—

HO: Incursion.

FOO: The second incursion was as a result of Nigerian troops (inaudible) attempt to cross to Biafra. Because where we are at (inaudible), each time you see the Biafran Baby—we call it Biafran Baby, a small plane.

EO: Small aircrafts.

FOO: Small aircrafts fashioned from Volkswagen engine over there. And then there was a type of bomb that was developed there, in a pail with a hole in the back. They call it Biafran Shore Battery, *Ogbunigwe*. So in that strike, I think I said two of their warships (inaudible) and then started flowing, because the Niger flows to us, the bridge between us and Onitsha. So Biafrans now used this Biafran Baby—the *Ogbunigwe*—to destroy and kill. So each time that they saw this Biafran Baby coming to drop bombs, they start killing in the town. That's the only time you hear the (makes sound effect).

HO: As I said, I wanted to record it. When this guy Roman Wicinski—he's an American
—

FO: He was killed, right?

HO: He was killed, during the second, uh—

EO: Incursion.

HO: —incursion, after Ogwashi Uku. They mistook him as a missionary.

FO: As a mercenary, yes.

EB: (inaudible)

FO: This is, uh, Roman—

HO: Wicinski.²

FO: Oh, no, we have him on there.

HO: You've heard of him before.

FO: Yeah. What are your thoughts about how this experience affected Asaba, the community here? What was the short and long term impact of this killing on the community, in the period immediately after and maybe on the long run?

FOO: Well—

FPO: (coughs) Sorry.

(phone rings)

FOO: They never knew that there is any male still remaining.

²This is the aforementioned Brother Roman, the headmaster of St. Patrick's College. Brother Roman was killed on April 16, 1968 while on his way to Benin for the conference.

FPO: You know, Asaba, because of early exposure to the white man and education, Western education, had a crop of educated elites. In fact, Asaba boasted of almost— talking about a single community or town—about the highest number of educated elite. And that was why even in the early twentieth century, Asaba administrators, the teachers and so on, were all over the country.

FOO: (inaudible)

FPO: And a lot of them got good and retired and came home to Asaba. So at the point, Asaba had the highest number of pensioners and retirees—

FOO: Professors.

FPO: —in Nigeria. So, um, this killing removed quite a number of these highly educated —

FOO: Elites.

FPO: Elites: professionals, technocrats, and administrators and the rest. That immediately had a very, very bad impact on the country—I mean, on the town. Then, too, a lot of families lost their breadwinners. Again, it affected, like, young men who were in school, whose parents could no longer—whose surviving parents could no longer, uh, fend for [them] in school. Then, the social impact of that: some of those dropouts now turning to crime or whatever else they could find, which is part of what we are suffering in this town today—which is part of what we are suffering in this town today.

FOO: Its effect after the war.

FPO: Yes, yes.

FO: Do you feel bitter for what happened? Forty years later, what is—what kind of sentiments does recalling this horrible experience create or generate for you? Do you feel —

FOO: That is after the end of the war?

FO: Well, now. Now, when you look back.

FOO: Now.

FPO: Now.

EO: The people though, it seems they are trying to forget—

EO: But, just like an angel, when this all goes, it's gone. So many buildings were destroyed. And so many lives, as he said, were ruined (inaudible).

FOO: (inaudible)

EO: And some people got mental [illnesses] because of what really happened.

FO: Do you think it's a good idea—would it be best to forget, or should we find—should the community find a way to remember what happened? And if so, what do you think is the best way? To forget what happened, or do you think we should—

HO: We can't forget.

FPO: We can't forget what happened.

FOO: That is why we are trying to build somewhere, where we can go and offer prayers.

HO: Remembrance.

FOO: Remembrance.

FO: So what do you think would be the best way to remember?

EO: Well—

FPO: One of the ways is, like, building a cenotaph.

FOO: A cenotaph, or other monument.

FPO: Or a monument. Then, the other way is to declare—

FOO: Also, we'll offer prayers.

FPO: Declare a day of remembrance, maybe October 7 of every year. The community could gather somewhere, maybe around the cenotaph.

FOO: Offer prayers.

FPO: Offer prayers—

HO: Lay some wreaths.

FPO: Address them—

FOO: Lay some wreaths. (inaudible)

FPO: And so on. And ensure that the children who are coming up—because a lot of them today, now, don't know what happened.

EO: At all. (laughs)

FPO: Because—

FOO: (inaudible)

FPO: —it is not recorded for them to read. This probably is because the government does not want to encourage us to remember. So if we had write-ups—when we were in school and we were learning history, we learned the history of American war of independence and all that. But there is no write-up, nothing for—

EO: For posterity.

FPO: For posterity, for our children coming up to read and understand. Even this *Blood on the Niger*³ written by Emma Okocha, it was not well—

FOO: It was not very well—

FPO: Projected. It was not well-projected here. And so, not many people—

FOO: By the powers that be.

FPO: Not many people have copies of that book. You know, not many people have copies, not many people have read it.

EO: So that—(inaudible) some write-ups and certain things, you know, as a sort of memorial, you see. But the way our government are thinking is not actually correct. For other wars, you understand the need to have all these things to remember what actually happened, and they way they were killed, and then (inaudible). But they have a cenotaph to remember.

FOO: (inaudible)

EO: So it is not a very good thing—

FOO: With time, those who saw the war, those who know about the war, will age out. And these (inaudible) who are coming may not know.

³*Blood on the Niger: The First Black on Black Genocide*, published by Triatlantic Books International (New York) in 2006.

FPO: They wouldn't know.

FOO: They wouldn't know.

HO: (inaudible)

FOO: Like you are here now, you are collecting datas from those who were around. This is the first stage. If you go to another place, you hear another woeful tale. (inaudible)

FO: So you think it is appropriate to do something to remember, for the kids?

FOO: Oh, yes.

FPO: Sure.

FOO: Yes, yes, we would welcome it.

HO: It's history.

EO: (laughs)

FOO: Okay, like you are here now: wasting your time, spending your energy, spending your resources, the risk. Everybody hearing about Nigeria now, from that side, will be thinking of nothing. But you have risked coming down to find out. So, it is something that we cherish. We would like to see it, and then leave a legacy for our children to read.

EO: Because when we, now, go off, the people (inaudible), they will not know what happened, and it is good that you know.

FOO: And we have never sat collectively to discuss this.

EO: You know what actually killed your father or your mother, so that you have to work to make sure such a thing does not happen—

FOO: The killing.

EO: The killing. That is our (inaudible).

FO: Does not happen again.

EO: Does not happen again. (inaudible)

HO: We are the eyewitnesses. We are the eyewitnesses. In twenty years to come, you will not find any—

FPO: Fifteen years.

HO: —any eyewitness.

FOO: Are you sure you will live up to twenty years more?

(all laugh)

HO: Even if—I say up to twenty years. Even if we live twenty years, we will not remember.

FOO: (laughs)

HO: And the people without history—

FOO: People without history—

HO: It is not a good way at all.

FOO: (Speaking in Igbo)

FO: Okay. Well, thank you very, very much for sharing your time and your accounts.

End of interview