

Patrick Okonkwo

Asaba Memorial Project

Interviewers: Elizabeth Bird (EB)

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EB: If we could start, sir, if you could just say your name and your date of birth.

PO: My name is Patrick Isitua Benjamin Okonkwo. Okonkwo is my father's name. Some call me Benjamin. Some call me Benji. I was born the 7th of January 1953. I was born in a town called Port Harcourt, now called River State. That is where I was born. Went to St. Mary's primary school. Joined St. Mathew's College 1965. Sixty-six the crisis had started, and uh we in River State—I come from Delta State—we in River State. Then, then I don't remember what day it was, uh, Anambra State. The whole place was called Eastern Region. We were there, when the first crisis happened in Kano, through the killing by Nzeogwu, that is when the crisis started in Nigeria. Another threat. They decide to creating small soldiers in Port Harcourt. There, they could do with students. Though, I didn't join the force because I use glasses. Also I was quite small. So I wasn't enlisted in the army. But we were in what we called the Boy's Company. So we were enlisted in Boy's company.

EB: What was the boy's company? Could you tell us a little bit about...

PO: They help soldiers. We help soldiers. We help soldiers, we go and get information—but we were, we cannot taken out on the warfront. We are still beyond the training.

EB: So you were quite young, this, you'd just be...

PO: Yes, I was very young, yeah.

EB: Mhmm.

PO: But what happened was, since I come from Delta State, the then governor of Eastern Region which is Ojukwu said they cannot protect us, we are not from that area. So, July, If I'm right, July 5th, Biafran war was declared, we have no place we have to come back to Asaba—which is my hometown. I came home to Asaba August, no, I came back on September 15th.

EB: Sixty-six?

PO: Nineteen sixty-seven.

EB: Nineteen sixty-seven, yeah.

PO: My father brought all of us back to Asaba.

EB: Who, you said "all of us," who was your family, could you describe the members of your family at that time?

PO: Uh, my family, including my father were twelve. We all came back to Asaba. My father had come to us already, last, the first two—the mother and the boy, they were already working, so they went back, and we

stayed. Then, September twenty-three, when our house, troops were landed, and I, when all soldiers had entered Asaba.

EB: In September? They came in September?

PO: Yes, September. Yes! They came in September twenty-three.

EB: Hm.

PO: The massacre in Asaba. They drove out to my place. There were many refugees in my father's compound, we have a very large compound. My father had a very big house. So people were running into our compound and stay. Until when they came and killed five people in my house. My immediate older brother, the one following him, and one of my cousins, three of them were killed.

EB: What were their names?

PO: One is Joseph Okonkwo, one is Cyril Okonkwo, one is (?) Okonkwo. They made the list in "Blood on the Niger." And the other two people. I don't know. They are friends, I don't know who they are—I can't remember their names. So, it continued, massacre continued. But what saved me was that, that this young man, a soldier, who was then, was a...full Corporal or so...was a Corporal in the army. Came in, saw my father carrying a shovel.

Then, okay, before then me and my two younger ones, the last two were twins, I took them, ran into the bush. Nearby bush, run to Achalla, the town called Achalla. We stayed there for two days—we couldn't eat. We weren't eating anything. I told you I had to bring them, these are kids of about, they were born sixty-two...so they were both...

EB: Five.

PO: Five years, yes. So I took them and, from where we were hiding there was no food. So I managed, I had to take them back to Asaba. So I get into Asaba, they were still killing. My father was carrying the shovel in order to bury his two children. So this soldier came, met him—there were three soldiers confronting my father. Meanwhile I was at the background. So they come and he wanted to show, ask my father, show them three of his children had been killed. He showed there are five corpses lying in the compound. Said he wants to bury them. One of the soldiers will say he will shoot my father. And my father is a saboteur. So this Joseph, this Joseph was the one that was who challenged the other one—if you shoot him, me, I will shoot you. Look at that man today he lost five of his children, and you say you want to kill him. What is it? How can that man be a soldier? So he spared our father. When they left that man Joseph came back and gave us protection. My father was able to dig the grave, two graves. To bury the two and one of their cousins. It was the third grave. The others, they were not too close we didn't know where they come from. We had to bury them in Asaba in my father's compound. But they are buried on the family, they are buried in the ground for the family. So this soldier stayed with us.

So, two days after that, they came with a gong (*makes gong motion*), announcing that people—that he soldiers are in Asaba killing people. That if we can come to welcome them and declare peace with them then we will be spared. That was a trick. So, they are going, I was walking—I went with them. But my father did not go. My younger brothers and my sisters they did not go away. Although, myself, I had to go. So, immediately I go there and saw when I go they are saying: "women here, men here." I ran away. I ran to the bush. But still they fired,

they fired at me I guess so, so I ran to the bush, I ran back to my house. So but they lined up, and said “women here, men here.”

EB: What made you run? Did you think something bad was going to happen?

PO: Yes, I felt something was bad going to happen.

FO: I have a, this is actually something we’ve been talking about. When the march or parade took place, the people were dancing and chanting...

PO: Yeah.

FO: This must have not been a happy event, because people knew that killings had been taking place.

PO: Had been going on, yeah.

FO: So in fact the parade and the singing and the chanting was a way to maybe stop the killing?

PO: Stop the killing, yes. That it was.

FO: Stop the killing. So it really, it wasn’t the first time the community had experienced the killings.

PO: No, the killings started in September.

FO: So it’s not because...

PO: But, October 7th, was when they, October 6th—prior to that, they had a meeting. The elders had a meeting. They were advised to come out en masse and, do a kind of a welcome, kind of..

FO: Showing...

PO: .. and showing them that we are a peaceful people.

EB: So this—

FO: So that this would stop the killing. So it’s not like, it’s not a joyful occasion.

PO: No, it’s not a joyful. It’s not very joyful. It’s not. What you do is you see people who came out you see it on their faces. They are more sad. They are not happy. But we were forced to do it. Like I say, that’s why, that’s why that’s not for the dance, but, you have to find peace for the town.

EB: So this was a desperate attempt to end the killings?

PO: Yes, to end the killings. Seriously, that is what it was. Even around, like, running, they are shooting at me. Why are they shooting at me? But I just, it’s my instinct. There was something I never did it in my life, and I can’t do it, and I somehow still can’t. What it was something in instinct—I can’t do it. And so that’s what I did—that’s how I ran into the bush.

EB: Yeah, hm.

FO: Terror will make you do the things...

PO: Yes, I don't know. Up to today I don't know the instinct that made me to do that. And, as I went farther, stopped, while on the way to, I'm worried they somebody going to chase after me, I decide to hide. So then I heard more shooting going on. Machine gun shooting.

EB: Mhmm.

PO: People, you see, and we were earlier shouting—you know that, people shouting. You know that people are now gone, people are now gone. So me, I run back to my father. I told to my father what I had saw. My father said why did you go? I said, well, I felt I should go since people, who are, one lady was, the brother, the one was the elderly men and the young ones. So, after the shooting, when I came back in the evening, there was this man, I forget what was his name, who they thought he was dead. But when I came, when I came down I saw him, they was, what he was—he was pushing at the corpses around him, to come out.

EB: Hm.

PO: He was not dead. That is what he was not dead. He was able to push out of the corpses, and then came out. And we hid together, and we saw footsteps coming and we hid together.

EB: Where were you hiding?

PO: Yes. After leaving they brought some young men. And then they have to drag all the corpses to the grave, and they have to bury. After pouring sand, they shot them.

EB: The people that buried?

PO: Yes, they shot them.

EB: They shot them and then...

PO: Yes! They shot them.

FO: Did you see the corpses after the shooting? Were you able to come back to the site of the massacre?

PO: I came back in the evening. It was because a cousin of mine, because I wanted to find out if anyone lived. But because, I don't know, but because I had been in the boy's company in Biafra. Before going back to Nigeria. Maybe some of those they got to know what was happening. So when we got there, saw the corpses.

FO: Could you describe the area in detail—what you saw?

PO: Uh, I see, you went either way you saw the heaps. Everywhere they build houses, you had a bigger heap. Other places are smaller heaps. Then, across the main road, they have built a mighty house on it, this place, there were heaps. (*makes a gesture indicating the heaps were very high*) The people who came out of it—there were more than two thousand people. They came out to welcome these lousy people. Then. So, not a lot. So a lot, I can't say a lot of people were escaping, or were as lucky as me.

EB: There were many who stayed, many who died.

PO: Yeah, they were killed, they were shooting them. Shouting and shooting them with machine guns not even, with machine guns.

EB: What were the soldiers that you experienced, what was how did they act? How did they behave? Were they wild? Calm? Controlled?

PO: They were very wild, very wild. When they came to our house were it not for the Joseph man they would have killed all of us.

EB: So this soldier, Joseph, this is the soldier that saved you...

PO: He saved us.

EB: ...you said he stayed in your house?

PO: Yes, he stayed in our house.

EB: To protect you?

PO: Okay, he felt free, to come to our house and he sleeps in our house. And this soldier, this Joseph, who, when they were going to try and cross the river Niger, when they were about to cross the river Niger, say he saw a huge human being. With breasts like this (*makes gesture indicting large breasts*). They were shooting at the object. They couldn't get, they couldn't shoot the object. But they were lifting their boats, their boats had been lifted. So, what he said is, father of god, if I have killed anybody since I got to Asaba let me go, but if I didn't kill anyone, save me. He say he found himself by the side of the river. So, he removed his uniform, he came to my house with only the pants on.

EB: Hm

FO: Is he Hausa or Fulani, or ...?

PO: So he's a Calabar man, a Calabar man. Fair complexion.

EB: So, he did not—he was against everything that the soldiers did.

PO: So, I think so. I think so.

EB: Yeah.

PO: Because he was saved. He was saved.

EB: When you, you said that the soldiers first came to your father's compound. What exactly happened? They just walked in and started killing people? How did that actually happen?

PO: Uh, really because I was inside the compound, when we heard gunshots. And they even threw a grenade which destroyed the back house of my father.

EB: Uh, okay. So we'll just go, so you said the troops were coming into your father's compound. Yeah.

PO: What they were doing, they were going compound by compound. They wanted to see people. But because they threw grenade into our house and having killed these people, the rest crowd scampered away. Like I tell you I carried my two younger ones. I ran away. Left was only my father.

EB: Hm. Do you, did you get any idea of what they—did they have a plan, the soldiers? Were they coming at anything in particular, looking for any particular thing?

PO: Okay like what they, what they told my father was they said that the Asaba people are the soldiers, fighting with the Biafran soldiers. That they're fighting the Nigerians. So, and, well that's a rumor that is a rumor. But they felt, the Binis, they had a kind of vendetta against Asaba people. But it is a rumor, I can't. I can't. But, in actual fact, it was a vendetta, they are killing people as if they had a purpose to kill. To eliminate Asaba people.

EB: Why do you think they had a vendetta...

PO: Because when they—well they would shoot you.

EB: But, do you think, what was their reasons, why would they think that they needed to...

PO: Okay, like, they another reason they say they are against Nzeogwu [*Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, one of the leaders of the first 1966 coup* who killed the Sardauna, is an Asaba man.

EB: Yeah, mhmm.

FO: Did you see any officers? During, in the events leading up to when all these killings were taking place, did you see any army officers or Nigerian officers anywhere?

PO: Uh, Nigerian officers, it was after the massacres, I started seeing Nigerian officers. Like, Alli, Babangida, Colonel Usman. And I seen them. They used to come, but they became... they became friendly.

FO: But this was...

PO: After the massacre. After the massacre they became friendly. Maybe when they discovered that the Asaba were a friendly people. They became friendly.

FO: You did not see them during the massacre?

PO: No, no, no. I left. Like I told you I left the place before the actual massacre.

EB: Mhmm. So you don't know, when the machine guns started, you don't know if there was somebody who ordered it or there were officers then..

PO: I don't know. Like I said, you know I had that instinct, you know I got out.

EB: You mentioned the burial of um, of the people, the men were ordered to bury the bodies and then they were shot themselves.

PO: Yes.

EB: Did you actually witness that or did somebody tell you about what happened?

PO: Um, of course it was night. The person was with me. The fellow who was half, who was lucky to be alive. And he was telling me, because I think he witnessed. Because he wasn't fully dead. He was trying to come out. But the corpses would land on him. He said that was what they were doing.

EB: What was his name? Do you remember?

PO: I can't remember his name. I can't remember his name. It was night. I only helped him to remove the last corpse. By his leg, and then he came out. Then there were footsteps coming, so we ran into the bush, by the side. So he told me that is what they were doing, that they were shooting, when they come when they see you—like if they had seen me, if they had seen me, they would say "come out, come out." They would take and give you shovel to start covering. When you cover—sometimes they will shoot you on top.

EB: You didn't see it directly.

PO: I didn't see it directly, yes.

EB: So when you—after this was over you had gone into hiding again. When did you come back permanently to Asaba finally?

PO: Oh, when Asaba...like, uh, I went to Biafra. But, because my father, I am so fond of my father. My father was still here I came back. So when I came back here sixty-eight. They had taken all of us, and many were taken to St. Patrick's college where there was a refugee camp.

EB: Was this the second operation?

PO: The second operation.

EB: So you had come back to Asaba before then? And then you were moved out to St. Patrick's college?

PO: I, we were moved to St. Patrick's college. Before, that's when they started destroying houses. That was when my father's house...my father's house was destroyed.

EB: That was in sixty-eight.

PO: Sixty-eight, yes.

EB: So you had been living in Asaba with your father between 1967, the end of 1967, and about March.

PO: Yes, yes.

EB: Um, so had life settled back at all to any form of normal between, in those few months?

PO: Yes, within that time after the massacre, we left in, started settling down until, because then we, I was in secondary school, until they took us all of us back to the barracks. Soon Biafra was shelling them. Still they weren't human, they were very inhuman to us, when the—in the camp. They are separating us, young men, students, young women, old women.

EB: Hm, this is when they took—this is during the 1968.

PO: Yes, during the 1968 we were in the compound. When they separated us we are, lots of young boys they took, they went and shot them, I never saw them. And they never came back to the camp.

EB: So they were taking some people...

PO: Yes, they were taking some of the young ones. Imagine a man of uh, at that time, a man of 59 years, attending a technical college. They had to be saved, but unfortunately he died. He was among those they took. And they never came back to the camp.

EB: Was there any particular pattern? Did they choose particular people to go and kill? Or...

PO: No they come and like, they told us to line up. They told us to line up, students, fathers...so they just went you-you-you. And you do not see them. They don't come back. And it was, they would come where we are. That's where they put their shelling machine. They were there, inside the compound, they were shelling the enemy. Yes, the guns were just shelling on the refugee camp. Inside the refugee camp they were shelling on enemy territory. What does that mean? It was one Reverend Father, Roman ...

FO: He was killed, right?

PO: Yes, he came in and then what do you...the brigadier commander said, remove this thing from here I can't be fighting with that. That's partially when they stopped. That's when they stopped the killing and coming to take youths to go and kill.

EB: We heard from one person another time that they came with trucks, lorries and took people into the lorries and took them away? Is that how they?

PO: Yes, they put them in the lorry, and we think maybe they go for training. But they never come back.

EB: Hm.

PO: I was lucky not to be taken Not to be taken. But, a lot of people who were in the same camp with me, they were taken and they never came back.

EB: Were they also killing people in the town? Were they?

PO: They were killing people, yes.

EB: They took everybody out of the town and were killing people and uh.

PO: What they were doing, what they were doing if they see you in the town they say you are a Biafran soldier and they will shoot you.

EB: Hm. So the town was empty.

PO: The town was empty. And eventually uh this is Roman, tThe Catholic missionary. He kind of granted normalcy in Asaba. And then we could go back to our houses gain. But all the houses were brought down. All the houses were brought down. So we had nothing. So we had to go squat in my uncle's place. Me and my father and my two brothers, uh, siblings.

EB: What about your mother? Your mother was?

PO: My mother was with the other kids in Biafra.

EB: So what was life like after that? After you came back you were living with your uncle, you had no...

PO: No, I was living with my father.

EB: Living with your father but in your uncle's house...

PO: Uh huh.

EB: How was life like then?

PO: What? Life was horrible. Had to fend for ourselves. I had to fend for them, until eventually my father's, my auntie, came to join us and then, be cause she was a trader, so she kind of took over feeding us. But even then I go to the farm, cut firewood. Cut the wheat. My father is a good farmer, too, my father is a good farmer. So it goes he was farming.

EB: So were you able to finish your education then?

PO: Yes, okay, uh, I my education came because of my two elder ones who were outside, they were able to pay our education, pay for us.

EB: What did you—what is your occupation now? I think we forgot to ask.

PO: I am a mechanical engineer by profession.

EB: And you work here in Asaba?

PO: No, I am a retired person now. Now, I work for myself. I do business in Asaba now.

EB: So just, in a general sense, what—all of these things that have happened—what did they, what effect did they have on Asaba? What was the long, short-term/long-term effect?

PO: Yes, like in after, in 1970 when you come to services there are no male, there are more female in Asaba than male. And uh, Asaba was taken about fifty years back, because before then we had young boys who were

enterprising. These people were all killed during the war. So, it was we the young ones, the small ones who now grow up to make Asaba what it is today.

EB: Hm.

PO: Because we find out that people who are older than me a little, by four or five years and downwards, there is nobody older that was.

EB: There was a generation missing.

PO: There was a generation missing. There were two generations will be missing.

EB: Do you think it is important now to tell the story, what, and memorialize the event?

PO: It is good to tell the story in fact. Like when I saw "Blood on the Niger" I was working with the publishing company. Printing company. Emma Okocha came to print with me. So I was engineer with the printing company. So during the, during the printing, I saw the book, and I said wow. So I looked for him, we were childhood friends, too. So, and I gave him some information which he included. I was happy. If we can't ever go back let's go ahead. But I think the story should be told. Some of this should be told to the world. It should be told what happened in Asaba. Asaba was sent about fifty years backwards. And you can see what is happening with Delta today. Asaba is nowhere to be seen. In the offices you cannot find another Igbo.

FO: Does this continue to have an impact today, then?

PO: Yes, it is still has an impact on us today. We still were not able to recover.

EB: What would you like to see happen now? What do you think should happen now?

PO: Uh, well as it is I'm not God. (laughs). But if I see I guess development can come fifty years better for us. But I'm not God, I can't say. Now what, I don't know it. As of the time we've got to recover, to make up with other races. We have a long way to go. We have a long way to go. And this has happened, has had to put a lot of fear in the young ones. I have to say, you can't fight back. We don't have to have feel afraid. Because a generation was afraid of the war. So that fear, that enigma is still hanging over them. Like me now, you come and slap me and I wouldn't have the courage to slap you back. I would say, "please go." Because I am afraid. Likewise with the rest of us. So we want, God up in heaven may help us, I don't know.

EB: Well thank you. Frasier you want...Is there anything else you feel you should tell us or say?

PO: I don't know if it is possible, what I would say is give us generations all these wars, all the—if somebody can help us. And give us a good face lift. There is no industry in Asaba, the war is over and they are all gone. And if you have money and if you have enough, we need your help. So I don't know if this will bring on, if the world will help, if the world could give us some help we would be happy. I would be happy to be a part of it, if some help could come from the world.

EB: Well, we're not God either (laughs).

PO: (laughs) So I appreciate what you are doing now. Emma started it. And I have to commend Emma. And secondly, I have a club, a development club. Which it was the past president.

EB: This is the Asaba Development Club.

PO: It was the past president. Even before him. Even before him there was a cenotaph we wanted to build. But a lot of politics are behind it. They are afraid if this gets to the world. They don't want to very well be a part of it. That is the government don't feel happy about it. They will not be happy about it. We need to make the world see what has been happening in Asaba. You see what is happening there? I paid five thousand naira as my contribution to build a cenotaph. It was stopped. When you came two years ago there is some problem we have. You've come back again and look at yesterday what almost happened. If you've left I don't know what you want to do. If I had left I would say "tell me what you want I'll go and take it for you from there." That's how I feel.

EB: Yes, but there are other people who are opposing this.

PO: Others are opposing this. Yes.

EB: There are a lot of people who...

PO: They don't want it to be seen. Gowon came down here and made a verbal apology to us. Why not put it in writing? Why not write it to us? If you come to apologize to Asaba, bring two factories and say, "okay this is where you can work."

EB: Yeah.

PO: "Oh, we will be happy to buy it."

EB: Well, we'll see what we can go.

FO: You know one thing we have found, everyone we have spoken to, we have never found a search for vengeance. What we have found is people want a search for the truth and they also want reconciliation. And I think we had an interesting conversation with the civil rights lawyer who said true reconciliation comes through the truth, that that's the only way is through the truth. He actually used the term he said "It's the only way we can close a wound, heal a wound..."

PO: Tell the truth and apologize, simple.

FO: And I think that this, that is not up to us, but I think certainly through this, if we could help that that would be good.

PO: Yeah, I look at example you guys are an example, Nigeria set up a reconciliation committee, the Oputa Panel, but when is Asaba going to get this common aid? We never get the aid. Even when they tell the whole story, well they block us. Why? Why particular why Asaba? I wish my father was alive. Or my uncle was alive. He would talk to you. My uncle could tell to them, could tell them about it.

End of interview.