

Dr. Joseph Nwajei

Asaba Memorial Project

Interviewers: Charles Massucci (CM) and Fraser Ottanelli (FO)

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Charles Massucci: Thank you for being here, sir. Would you please state and spell your name, your place of birth, and your date of birth?

Joseph Nwajei: My name is Joseph Nwajei, J-o-s-e-p-h; middle name is Kanayochuwku, K-a-n-a-y-o-c-h-u-w-k-u. The last name is Nwajei, N-w-a-j-e-i. Born at Lagos on the tenth day of June 1951, in Nigeria.

CM: Okay. We're here talking about an incident or event that occurred back in 1967, in the city of Asaba. Were you living there at the time?

JN: Yes. I remember I was fifteen years old when this incident happened. When the war was on, on the advancement of the Nigerian soldiers overtaking Bendel State —that was Mid-Western Region— most of the schools were closed and I had to come back to Asaba, where my mother was.

CM: You had to come back from where?

JN: From school. I was a secondary school student at St. Pius X Grammar School, Onicha-Ugbo. I had a younger brother, who was twelve years old; his name is Felix Nwajei. He went to school at St. Patrick's College, Asaba, so he was a day student going to school from the house. I had an older brother, Francis Nwajei. He was a student at Edo College. When the Nigerian soldiers made their advance to recapture Mid-Western Region from the Biafran soldiers, my late uncle, Pius George Nwajei, who was the guardian then of my older brother Benny, had to bring my older brother back home to Asaba. I had older siblings, four older siblings, who were not near where the crisis was then. My oldest brother was in Cairo, the University of Cairo, then. My older sister was somewhere in—two sisters were somewhere in England, London. And I had a second brother who was at Lagos as a foster; his name was Alex. My second sister's name was Apollonia. They're still alive. My second sister's late, Veronica. And I had another brother, Anthony, who was a medical student at the medical school at Lagos. They were nowhere near the war. So, we were these three young siblings, three of us, the three boys, who came home. We grew up at Ibadan; that was where my father was when the crisis started, my sister thinks.

Dad thought it was safest to send all three of us back to our place of origin. I was a student at an international school at Ibadan before the war started. So, sixty-six [1966], when the confusion started and it was obvious the Igbos were not safe in any part of the country, although there was no killing in the west, my father thought it was best for us just to—sent three of us, the three youngest ones, back with our mother back to Asaba. In getting back to Asaba, she made sure we all headed back to school—with our school. So, from January through December when we came back in sixty-six [1966], all attempts were made to settle us in various schools. I ended up at St. Pius; that was where I was schooling. My younger brother at SPC, and my older brother went to another college until the crisis came to us. So, we all had to come back to Asaba.

CM: On the days and months prior to October of 1967, do you have a recollection of what was the mood or what were the concerns of the people of Asaba?

JN: Peaceful.

CM: Peaceful?

JN: Peaceful. Nothing happened. Nothing was amiss, and there was no suspicion of anything at all. Really, that time most of us were in boarding schools. When I was at St. Pius, I was a boarding student. When we had holidays, you know, we go home—and when school was in session we all went back to school with everything we had and stayed at school. So, I was in a boardinghouse when the Biafran soldiers took over—overrun the Mid-Western Region. All we just saw then at school were tanks crossing the road. We were very close to the main highway. I could see the Biafran soldiers advancing in armored cars towards Benin [City]. It was peaceful. Nobody was molested. They just passed. It just took but a whole day.

CM: What was the time frame when you witnessed the Biafran army?

JN: It was early in the morning, very early in the morning. We just heard rumblings, so we knew something was up in the road. So, we all came out from our boardinghouses, and we were just looking, and we saw soldiers: early in the morning, between five and six o'clock in the morning. We saw troops and tanks, singing joyously and advancing, going towards Benin. That was all. And after they passed, we continued with school. Nothing happened. It was when the Nigerian soldiers were knocking them back that everybody felt, "Okay, if the killing had been happening in other parts of the country, it's best for you to be where, you know, your parents were. That was the thing that led my father, who was a worker at the University of Ibadan at that time, asked my mom to take us home. That was in sixtysix [1966]. I cannot remember exactly when I left school in sixty-seven [1967] to return to Asaba, but it was sometime around June, probably around June. We all came back, and the conflict was getting close to us, the advancements of Nigerian soldiers in every direction pushing the Biafran soldiers back.

CM: So, when you were sent back to Asaba, you moved into your mother's—

JN: Yeah, where my father had a house. So, I stayed in my father's house.

CM: Okay.

JN: It's a big family compound. The way the houses are, the compounds are, my grandfather was owner of the compound, and he had sections of land that his sons were allowed to build a house anywhere they wanted to build a house there. It was on a main road, on Nnebisi road. My father had a sturdy house by that time, which was the strongest house on the compound then, at the extreme end of the compound. Then there were some other houses in the middle, the back, a restroom—an outdoor restroom—at the extreme end of the house. In front of my father's house was something like a small shop, where one of my uncles, Sam, had a small shop where he sold items. There was a small entrance on the side of it where a car can drive in. My father's older brother, George, was a public service commissioner of the then-Mid-Western Region. He was the one that was a guardian to my older brother, who was at Edo College. When he was coming back home, he came back home with his wife, his younger children. He had a little boy, the smallest boy then; his name was Benjy. He was about a year old. The wife was a teacher. We fondly call her Miss. So, we all came home, so everybody was in the compound. The compound was filled with kids before the war started. Because there was nothing we could do, we just played all day long. There was no school. It was fun to us. And we just assumed the way the Nigerian—the Biafran soldiers overtook Bendel State, it's going to be the same thing. The Nigerian soldiers are going to come back the same way and won't pay us any attention; they'll go after the soldiers and everything will come

back to normal soon. And then, at the outskirts of the town was the big River Niger, where you had to cross; there was a big bridge there. So, we all just [were] at home—until that eventful day.

CM: The presence of the federal soldiers, do you remember how long they were there prior to—the day we're speaking about is October 7.

JN: October 7, yes.

CM: Were the troops, the federal troops, present in your town?

JN: No. They were not present in my town.

CM: So, if you can describe your memory of when they arrived, and then what happened once they had arrived?

JN: I remember very vividly the first week of October, the shelling of the gun cannons. The shooting got louder, closer towards Asaba. Some cannons would fall on somebody's house, and you are just lucky if you are alive or dead. With the cannon falling, some people decided, "Okay, it's not safe. Let's go to the east," so they gathered up their kids and crossed the River Niger. There's a big bridge there, still motorable to cross. My uncle said, "They're not going to take risk, let's stay behind." On the afternoon of the fifth of October—from the first day of October, the noise got closer to Asaba. There was no cannon fire near our house. So, on the early morning of the fifth, my uncle, who was the oldest of the Nwajeis, asked everybody who was of Nwajei descent who was in the compound to come to my father's house, being the strongest house. My grandfather's house was just adjacent to my father's house, a big old story building, not very strong in terms of structure: it would collapse easily. So, he asked everybody to come and stay at my father's house. In my father's house, there were about thirty to forty of us gathered in the house, just praying. My Uncle George just tried to comfort all of us and keep us calm. "Everything will be all right." His car was parked in front of the house.

So, that was where I was at. We all just sat down there until around two in the afternoon, between one and two in the afternoon, when they broke through the front door. Big men, black, tall, armed to the teeth. They put their weapons on us. It was—the butts of their guns were just pounded on our shoulders, our heads. You have a bump on your head. They just kept on moving from room [to room]. The house has a central living room where all of us were, and there were six other rooms shooting out in each direction. From the family room, there were four rooms. In the back of the house, there were two other rooms, and there was a small foyer after the living room. If you're standing in the foyer, you can see the front of the house; you can see the rear of the house. After they beat us, somehow I found myself in the foyer in the back of the house. My brothers were still alive, my mom was alive, everybody was alive, and everybody was just scattered into various rooms of the house. Then, it got to a point—they got so infuriated, because my father worked for the Nigerian police for a while. He retired as an inspector of the police. And his uniform and his picture were hanging on the wall. That made them even more infuriated. "Oh, he's a Biafran soldier! I will kill all of you today!" Apparently, they knew who my uncle was; they were looking for him somehow, because I have two uncles who were in the house then. One was George, one we called Papa Sammy; his name was Sam. They took George. I could see the front of the house, and all I saw was just soldiers milling around the street with their armored personnel carriers packed, not moving: a bunch of soldiers.

When they took him out of the house, I just had a feeling from what I heard him say: they were going to kill us. "Okay, this is my time to make a dash for it." I looked at the rear of the house from the foyer where I was standing. There were no soldiers at the rear of the house. Then they took my uncle to the front of the house. In that split second—they were so much enthusiastic about getting my uncle out of the house. I thought they

wanted to kill him so that we wouldn't see it. They took him out the front of the house and took him in between my father's house and my grandfather's house. At that time, there were no soldiers at the back of the house. I ran, and they took off. I heard a shot. "Come back! Stop! Come back! Stop!" Gunshots followed, but luckily none hit me, and I aimed for the outdoor rest house on the extreme end of the compound. The compound is fenced with palm fronds, which were dry, and I knew that I could knock it down. So, when I got to the end of that restroom, I used it as a shield. I was able to knock the fence down. One of my cousins, a girl, ran after me, ran along with me. So, we escaped.

Having grown up at Ibadan, I never really knew Asaba very well. My first recollection of coming to Asaba was in sixty-six [1966], the advent of the war crisis. I only know where my sister's husband's village was. Up till now, I cannot recollect the number of villages they have in the town, but I just knew how to get to my sister's place. So, I ran. I knew my sister's place was inside, not on the main road, so I ran towards that direction. My cousin came after me. "Slow down, slow down!" I knew somebody was with me who was in the same family. Somehow, her own father did not come back from Benin. I had two uncles who were in Benin: George, who was the oldest man, and my father's younger brother, whose name was Lawrence. He didn't come back. He was killed when the Nigerian soldiers advanced—that, we later learned—at a hospital where he tried to disguise himself as a patient. They went up and they killed him there. By this time, we never knew what happened, though; we just guessed probably he ran, he was going to come back home.

So, with my cousin, I go to the outskirts of the town. I saw a lady—never knew her before, an old lady, who said in our dialect "*Nwa baa üzö*", which means "My son, go on this path." The path led me to a village called Achalla, quite a distance—I don't know how far it was. So, we ran and we walked: when we were tired, we slowed down. On our way, before we go to Achalla, we came across a bunch of soldiers again, but this time they were speaking Igbo. So, we just guessed. "Okay, they could be Biafran soldiers who have been cut off, who never knew the Nigerian soldiers would reach Asaba."

We summoned up enough courage to come out from the bush where we were hiding. They asked us what was [going on], and we told them, "Nigerian soldiers beat us there in Asaba." I think about four or five of them had their uniforms and their guns. Three of them had civilian clothes on; they disappeared, and they told us they were going towards Oko. Oko is another village, which is very close—after Asaba—to the River Niger. Some people, some farmers, know how to cross the river and get toward there. So, that was the last we saw of them.

My cousin and I continued our journey towards Achalla. Eventually, we crossed a stream, and going through the stream—it was around five, six o'clock in the evening we crossed the stream. We were still hearing shooting, obviously, when we were running. We said, "Okay, we don't know anybody here. Where are we going to stay?" There was a primary school: no windows, no doors, but it was enough shelter, chairs and benches. Okay. So, we got at them together. That was where we slept. We ate raw corn. On our way past the stream, we saw farmlands. There was nobody harvesting the corn when we arrived at them, so come on, let's go get some corn to eat. There was no matches. We took some corn to the shelter and we ate it. It was enough to give us enough energy so we could (inaudible) the village. It was okay.

So, we slept there that Thursday night; it was a Thursday. On Friday morning, all Friday, there was less shooting. We didn't hear any shots coming from Asaba. Discussing with my cousin, "It appears they've gone to Onitsha. Let's go back to Asaba on Saturday morning." So, on Saturday morning, my cousin and I got up again and said, "Okay, let's head back for Asaba." It was early in the morning, around six-thirty, seven o'clock. We got to that stream again, and we saw another old lady. She said, "My son, don't go back to Asaba yet. Go back to Achalla." So, we listened to her, and we didn't go back.

Barely two to three hours later, the gunshots started again. That was on Saturday. It went on with more intensity. We just kept on hearing gunshots all day long. We didn't know what was going on. We sat by the stream, by the end of the stream. An exodus started to occur. Women and children started to troop into Achalla. We just stayed there, with the anticipation that we were going to see somebody, one of our aunties that would come. With the mayhem that happened on Thursday, my mother never knew where I was. She never knew I was alive. My brothers were with her after the Thursday mayhem. Uncle George was killed by the side of the house. Somehow, my mother took my brothers into the village where her mother's house was, and that was where they stayed. The men had attempted to burn my father's house down. It was a big house, with walls about this thick. The rooms were charred, but the house did not burn down. You mainly see bullet holes everywhere, windows shot out; the wall [has] bullet holes.

In the evening on Saturday, I saw some of my aunties that ran from Asaba during the exodus. When I saw them, I didn't know where to go. I knew my father's mother is in Ibusa, and I knew her. So, I said, "Okay, let's all go to Ibusa," so we continued our walk from Achalla to Ibusa. Getting to Ibusa, I stayed with my grandmother. And then, the story is really horrible. On the stream, before I saw my aunties, still there was shooting. Men incontinent of stool and feces and soldiers just shoot you: you know, line you up, and they were defecating themselves because of the extreme fear. Some would pee on themselves. The soldiers just thought it was fun. They just kept on shooting at them. So, when we got to Ibusa, I was with my grandmother. Somehow, my mother heard I was alive, and sent some clothing, some shoes. I never knew what had happened to my brothers. Some of my aunties knew. Every time they saw me, they would keep quiet and just gaze, so I started to have a feeling that my brothers are dead. I started to listen discreetly. Eventually, I heard them talking about the death of my brothers. I told them, "Okay, if that is the situation, what is the point of me staying here? Let me take my own bullet and die, too." It's a long walk. I told my aunties the next morning, "They're going to kill me, too, because I'm going back."

So, I got all my stuff in a small bag, and started to walk back on the main road between Ibusa and Asaba. I can't remember how many kilometers it is, but I walked back to Asaba. On getting home, I went to the house. My mom said, "They are dead." I said, "What happened?" She said, "The soldiers asked them to come and welcome them." Also that Friday when there was no shooting was because it was a Muslim prayer day. A lot of the soldiers were Muslim, so they didn't do any of this crazy stuff on that Friday. So, on Saturday, they had done whatever they wanted to do. That was when they did most of the damage.

They gathered everybody to come and welcome the Nigerian soldiers on the path there. Men were separated from the women. My older brother was seventeen, my younger brother was twelve. Mom told me that in the evening hours of the seventh, she had to go look for their corpses at the place where they were shot. At that place where the mass killing took place, when they got to that location, the soldiers surrounded the perimeters of the area with machine guns. They were picking the men out in numbers and just killing them. Mom, in the evening, was able to identify their corpses, took them in a wheelbarrow, pushed them to the family house, where they were buried. So, I never saw their corpses, never saw their bodies.

This is a story that I don't tell all the time. I thought so much—we were called the Three Musketeers, we were so close. You don't pick a fight with any one of us, because if you do, the three of us are gonna gang up on you and make sure we get you. After that, all was silent in the house. I go back and tried to stay to comfort my mom. How can you console someone like that? Instead of her [having] to go to get some water, I'll make attempts to get it for her. "The soldiers will still harass you." She got frightful that with my annoyance and my youthfulness, I was going to start a fight with the soldiers.

She begged me to go back to school. The schools in the hinterland had opened up at that time, and I obliged her to go back. A Catholic Reverend Father who is still alive, Monsignor Chukwuma, took me back to school. Throughout the whole war, all of their students never came back home. My mom knew I was at school and I was safe there.

During the holidays, the principal who was our principal, Mr. Eza, arranged for other families to take care of us instead of going back to Asaba. At one point, the principal made an attempt for me to go back and see my dad at Ibadan; he was still there, alone. It was a trip down the river—the [Reverend] Father took me. When I got back to Ibadan, he was so frail. It was sad. His beard was white and long; he had lost some weight. So, I saw him. I went to his office. He told me that, even in the house, he did not sleep in the house most nights: he would go and sleep in a Catholic church. Nigerian soldiers came there to look for him.

My mother used to be a merchant trader of gold and textiles, who would travel across the West African subcontinent, West African coast of Ghana. When she comes back with funds, she would buy stuff for us. Our house was full of activities when we went to Ibadan. The death of my brother brought an abrupt end to that. She had no funds to do this anymore. I became the precious son. God added (inaudible) to my life. My father had been retired, and died from a stroke in 1973 or seventy-four [1974], after all that. But I became such a precious commodity in the house that he would not let nobody touch me. Nothing should dare happen to me.

I was academically gifted, and ended up studying medicine at the University of Lagos. When I finished with my youth service, I worked in the Nigerian National Petroleum Company at Warri a couple of years, until I left Nigeria and I moved to the United States. That was about eighteen years ago. I have four kids, two boys and two girls, and my wife accompanied me here today.

My older brothers who were alive then never knew this history: it was so painful to talk about. My mother died two years ago at ninety-four. It was (inaudible) together, won't let nobody see us cry, and talk about the boys. It's very hard today. I know where the boys are buried. Every time I go back home, I just go and look at them.

CM: They're buried in a—?

JN: A mass grave?

CM: A mass grave?

JN: No. A friend of the family has a tomb. When my father—after my mother got a wheelbarrow and took them there, she said all she had were women, so the grave was not a very deep grave. When my father retired, he put a headstone there. In our culture, it's always—corpses are always buried around a family house; it's supposed to bring them reincarnation. You don't have—when you have a cemetery, it's only for visitors. The missionaries who died are buried there, and visitors who died. But in our place, most people are buried in the family house. At times, they will even dig a grave in their room and bury people in the room. It's not something dishonorable; it's a reincarnation where a man is supposed to come back.

Emma Okocha's mom and my mom were the best of friends, closer even than sisters. So, when he wrote his first book, his mother had told him, "Oh, my friend took two of her sons." It was not only my two brothers. I had had another cousin, Augustin; he was seventeen. Augustin Okafor. His mother was (inaudible). He's late now; he died in the same massacre. I don't know where he was buried. I just knew October 5—October 7 were days that somehow I just take things easy. Doesn't one of my brothers have to make it? How I survived was the death of

my uncle Pius George Nwajei. It was their enthusiasm to kill him that gave me the chance to run, and I did run, for my dear life.

CM: Did your family stay in Asaba?

JN: My mom stayed after the war. My mom stayed.

CM: And she finally passed—?

JN: She finally passed two years ago.

CM: In the same home?

JN: Yes, in the same home, although no—when she became that old it was difficult for her to take care of the house. My brothers were back in the town, so my older brother and my sister are back in the town; they wanted to make sure—they took her in, and she didn't have to do anything. They said, "Mom, you can't look after yourself in this house; and stay with us." She finally died in my sister's house.

CM: I know that you didn't witness the largest part of the massacre; you witnessed your family's tragedy. Have you been to the area?

JN: Yes.

CM: Do you believe that most people were able to recover the bodies the way that your family did?

JN: Many families perished, were completely wiped out. Many families were completely wiped out. Not many were able to go back there and retrieve their bodies, no, because at the time, it became so difficult—by the third day, you could not recognize any person. Even when I came back, you could still see corpses on the street.

CM: So they laid—

JN: Yes, unburied.

CM: Do you know how they were buried or who buried them?

JN: Eventually, somehow they made some people come and dig some graves; that was what they were doing. Whenever they saw a man, they'd make him come and dig a grave for the corpses, and they buried them there. Just right where they were.

CM: Part of this project is to possibly excavate over there. In your opinion, do you think that is an appropriate act?

JN: I don't know. I really don't know. I'm not going to lie to you. What is the excavation going to bring?

CM: If we—

JN: What are we going to do with the excavation? Okay, if you are doing a pathological survey of what happened, how they died—the only place you can really see the evidence is at that mass site at Ogbé-Osowa. Many were shot by the bank of the River Niger.

CM: If the purpose of the excavation was to recover the bodies, attempt to identify them, and give a proper burial, would you think that was appropriate?

JN: It will be nice, but I think it's going to be more painful. I think it will be more painful, because most of those families who lost people were completely destroyed. When there's a burial in our place, we have what are called traditional burials. They're not—it's a way to release the souls of those who have passed. But when you are that young, when you die young, we don't do that traditional burial, just a small ceremony. If they can be identified and given to the families, it would be nice. But would the families want it?

CM: That's something we would have to inquire.

JN: Inquire will the families want it. I was lucky Mom was around to go look for the bodies of those two boys. Now we know where they were laid to rest. But many were not claimed. I remember when I came back, I went there. The stench of death was there; you could see bones sticking out of the ground, and dogs coming to pick upon some bones.

CM: The notion or the suggestion that a memorial should be created: what's your opinion of that?

JN: I think it's good. I think it's good. But going there to dig up those graveyards, I don't know. If the memorial was there, it's a good thing to do. To be somewhere where people can come and see what really happened—my kids never knew the story until Emma Okocha wrote the first book and sent an autographed copy of the first volume of *Blood on the Niger*. I gave it to my oldest, and he said, "Daddy, is it true?" I said, "Yes, every bit of it is true." When I planned to come over here, I tried to put some things into writing for the first time. I asked my last child to do it for me, to type it on a word page. She was crying, and of course wanted to know, "Did it really happen?" I said, "Yes, it did." The guy I work with, I told him what I was going to do in Florida. He said, "Are you sure this is a true story?" I said, "Yeah, it's a true story, not a fabrication." "Was it Nigerians that did this, and not somebody else?"

CM: In this event, this shooting, your uncle was targeted, from your observation.

JN: Mm-hm.

CM: Do you have an opinion, or do you have knowledge of why this massacre occurred?

JN: Well, number one thing I notice in where I come from is the degree of education. Most of us are well-schooled, and when they created Mid-Western Region, most of the technocrats were from Asaba, because we are well-educated people. The Permanent Secretaries in the Ministries we have over here, a bunch of them are from Asaba. The Prime Minister was from Asaba, and he probably surrounded himself with people whom he knew could help him govern. And somehow, in the Igbo-speaking area of Mid-Western Region, Asaba was a very popular town. Many people who came from the hinterland, either out of shame or somehow always wanted to identify and to introduce themselves as from Asaba. It's only when you come across an Asaba man—the next question an Asaba man will ask is "Okay, which village are you from in Asaba?" We have seven quarters. "Which of these quarters do you come from?" is going to be the next question. "And if you don't give me that answer, I know you're not from Asaba." So, you find most of the people who were from the Igbo-speaking area of Bendel State said they were Asabas. Somehow, there were some Nigerian soldiers—I mean, there were some Biafran soldiers who were of the Igbo-speaking area. Most of the most trusted fighters [Chukwemeka Odumegwu] Ojukwu had were from the Igbo-speaking area. [Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna] Nzeogwu was from the next town over from Asaba, but most of the time they introduced themselves as Asaba

people. Colonel [S.B.] Nwajei, who has the same last name, is not from Asaba; he's from Ibusa. Colonel [Michael] Okwechime is an Ibusa, or from one of these other villages. Not one of them was from Asaba. There were a couple of them; there was one, [Gabriel] Okonweze, who was from Asaba. I don't know how he died. Eventually, there was one man who was an Asaba man—they called him Hannibal [Joseph Oseloka Achuzie]—in the Biafran army. So, somehow, the Nigerian soldiers either willfully or spitefully assumed most of the soldiers, some of the generals and commanders who were fighting under Ojukwu, were all from Asaba, which was not true. And, at the same time, because they occupied this strong position in the government then, they wanted to eliminate all of them, to kill them. When they came to look for my uncle—I had two uncles there, and I kept wondering, "Why did they kill Uncle George?" Uncle Sammy was there; they didn't touch him. So, they knew. He was targeted. There's no doubt in my mind.

CM: When you say "they"—?

JN: The Nigerian soldiers.

CM: The Nigerian soldiers on the ground, or the government who sponsored it?

JN: On the ground. On the ground. What, if anything, they had with the federal government, I didn't know. I don't know about that. But somehow, a bunch of soldiers just surrounded people, and the central government claimed they didn't know about it? I don't believe that. That's the only place where you have a mass killing that took place during the war.

CM: I think we've covered most of the points that we had set out to ask. Before we conclude this, is there any issues that we haven't asked about, or any observations you would like to share with us before we finish?

JN: No, not really. Just to thank you. Thank you.

CM: With that, I appreciate you participating.

JN: Thank you very much for giving me the voice of my brothers. Thank you.

Fraser Ottanelli: Thank you for sharing it with us.