

Frank Igeh

Asaba Memorial Project

Interviewer: Fraser Ottanelli (FO), S. Elizabeth Bird (EB)

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Fraser Ottanelli: Today is Sunday, December 13 [2009] and we are in Asaba, Delta State, [Nigeria], and we are talking to Mr. Frank Igeh. I'm Fraser Ottanelli, together with me in the room is Liz Bird and Dr. Ify Uraih. Good afternoon and thank you very much for agreeing to meet with us. I would like to start asking a question about your family, who were the members of the family, where you lived, what your father did, this is in the period even before the war broke out.

Frank Igeh: Do I have to start with my father?

FO: You may start with—yes, if you wish.

FI: Well, my father died when I was very young. My father died when I was very young, and I was brought up by an uncle.

FO: So you were living with?—

FI: I was living with my uncle.

FO: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

FI: Yes, I had brothers and sisters.

FO: How many did you have?

FI: I have two sisters and a brother from the same mother.

FO: And were they older than you? Were they—

FI: That is a two — my mother had both two male and two female.

FO: And where were you in this number of kids?

FI: Number of, uh? (speaking in Igbo)

Ify Uraih: Yes, in Igbo (speaking in Igbo)

FI: I was number three among the children of my mother.

FO: When the war began, where were you living?

FI: I was in Asaba, here.

FO: In Asaba. Okay. Could you describe, then, the events of — leading up to what happened in October of 1967? You can decide when you want—where you want to begin, but if you could tell us what your recollections are of the period leading up to the killings.

FI: Well, um, well, that was before the massacre of the persons in Asaba, or before the whole crisis started?

FO: Wherever you want, if you want to begin before the crisis began and then we can move on to the massacre in Asaba. Wherever you want to begin.

FI: The town was very quiet, of course, with some primitive activities of the inhabitants. So, that is just about that, about that. Then I personally was a member of Nigerian Red Cross Society, that's then British Red Cross Society. When the crisis started, I was called upon to come to training at Benin. That is, in preparation for the events of the war coming up. Then after the training, I came back to Asaba. Then when the troubles started in Asaba—'cause at the time Biafrans crossed over to Benin, I was in Asaba. Some of my people crossed over to Biafra. I still stayed in Asaba hoping that I still have the duty — implemented the training that I got from Benin. Because I was brought up, I mean I was trained as a Red Cross to give first aid to victims of the crisis. So I stayed back in Asaba.

FO: How old were you when these events—at this time?

FI: Well, I was born in 1930. Then 1932—uh, 1960—1967—no, 1966.

FO: And so in sixty-six you had been trained by the Red Cross in Benin?

FI: Yes.

FO: And so did you witness the arrival or the passage of the Biafran army through Asaba in September?

FI: I was in Asaba. I was in Asaba. When they crossed over to Benin, from Benin to Ore, we, in fact, we thought that it was just a war between the combatants. We didn't know that then war would descend to civilians. So, I was in Asaba. But the saddest thing was when these people, when the Federal Troops captured Benin, driving Biafrans back home, back, back, some of our people, many of our people crossed over with the Biafrans. Then we stayed in Asaba or until they came on that October, October, the day they came to Asaba.

FO: How did you feel when you knew that the troops were coming? Were you afraid? Were you happy?

FI: Well, uh, in fact, the very day they came we were not happy because there was a sort of, you know, people were crossing, there's no celebrating anymore in the town. There's no celebrating anymore in the town. But what I did was, we went to a certain place in our—behind our house to hide. After hiding, we were hiding there until we first woke up. Meaning that these people came in and started burning houses. So, I went inside the house and put on my Red Cross uniform. I told my people, "If you see me, better, if you don't see me, know they've killed me." Then I just went out. On my way going—I just, I went to verify actually whether the people are Federal Troops or still Biafran troops, but by the time I was outside from my house towards one of the roads, I heard them spoke Hausa, then it came to my mind that these people are Biafran soldiers [*He means Federal, as he says later*]. Then, I couldn't run anywhere. There were two soldiers, they came very close to me, they pointed gun at me, asking me, Who am I? I would say to them, "Red Cross," but they did not know what Red Cross is.

FO: These were Bi—Federal Troops?

IU: Federal Troops.

FI: Federal Troops. They did not know what Red Cross is. I decided since one of them ask the one pointing gun at me to shoot, he just spoke in Hausa. Then I heard it, I told him, "Don't shoot me, take me to your officer." Then, he took me to one of his officers. When I got there, he started asking me, Who am I? I was telling him, with my uniform on, he did not know what I was. And they took me to another officer, then the officer recognized my uniform and said that I should go. And I left the area, I went home. So it was around then 7:30[PM], the night was just coming.

FO: When these events were taking place, did you see any people being hurt, or anyone being killed, or any dead bodies?

FI: That very day, I heard that the people were shot dead, but I didn't see them. I didn't see them. It was the following morning that the people started rampaging, breaking houses of those who cross over, removing their properties, and all sorts of things. They came to our place, when they came to my place, they saw me with my uniform and everything, then I told them that yesterday when I was taken away to one of the officers, the first officer we met told them to take me to Captain Mattias, so I just captured the name that day, that day.

FO: And this is just as the troops had arrived? This is?

FI: Yeah, that was the very day they arrived. So by the time they came the following morning, I wanted to break our place and see something. I told them that Captain Mattias said nobody should go, come near. They were surprised that I knew that officer.

FI: Captain Mattias. So, they left that place and they went to round the houses, break in the houses, and then removing radio, properties, valuable properties. They just cart them away. That day, that day. Then the third day, that was the day of massacre. That very day they were just shooting gun indiscriminately, shooting everywhere. Few of us who were around — in fact, not few of us, because at the sound of this, the people were just — the people were hidden. The saddest thing, when they told the people to come out and welcome the soldiers, then they started coming out, and that was the time some people went around telling them, Come out. People were organizing to raise money and give to them.

FO: Was your family told to go out and greet the soldiers, too? Was your family asked to go and greet the soldiers?

FI: Yes, of course. Even my brother who was killed was one of them, just like us, as somebody in this place, and this mindset. My brother was one of the people telling people, Come out. And then they shortly killed him; he was one of the people they killed at Ogbe-Osawa.

FO: So, people were told to go and welcome the troops?

FI: Yes.

FO: And what did you experience then? What did you see happen?

FI: Well, the people trooped out and as they trooped out singing, welcoming them, that was the group—these men who lived here and I joined. They were taking them around, they were gathering all these other people. Including some members of my family who were there killed, they followed them. But they went around, but I didn't go out with them, I was just waiting in our area. Then they went out and at the certain site later that day, they killed all of them.

FO: So, you did not join everybody else?

FI: I didn't join them, I didn't go out with them.

Elizabeth Bird: Why not? Why did you not go? Why? Why did you decide to stay?

FI: Well, naturally, I am not used to dancing. It was a curtain of people dancing and other things. You know as much as I don't like dancing, I didn't follow them to go anywhere. We did not even know that it was for them to gather there — to gather the people and kill. We thought it was ordinary dancing and welcoming them. But as much as I didn't like going out and dancing, I didn't follow them.

FO: What did you experience after the people left and participated in this dance? What happened to you during the rest of the day? What did you see?

FI: Well, later on we heard that our people who went out with them, they were all shot. They were all killed. Some of my brothers and my in-laws who came to stay with us from Benin and north they were all killed. They went with the people to the area they killed the people.

FO: Did you hear the shots? Did you hear the machine guns firing?

FI: The place is far from my place. It is a little bit far from our place.

FO: And when did you find out that this had happened?

FI: Then the following day I went to the site, I went to the place. I personally, I went to the area. I saw the corpses everywhere. Then some people were shouting that — you know, suffering and shouting. I saw an ambulance, which came from St. Patrick's College where the army is camped, to command they remove a man. But before they came, the man had died. So when I came, I met the ambulance. I told them, "Please, help and carry out—carry these people." They said, No, they told them already to bring a man, one man, that man has died. Then I went with my bicycle to that area, to St. Patrick's. When I got there, I saw some soldiers arming the gates. The leader of the people at the gates asked me, What did I come to do? I told him that I want them to give me ambulance to go and—he directed somebody to go and shoot me somewhere. He said, "Go and kill this man." Another soldier said, "No. The man that is so bold to come all the way to this place and then you still killed him — don't kill him." Then he asked me, "What did I come to do?" I told him I wanted them to give me this ambulance to go to bring the people who were not dead. They directed me to go to MTD, that is the Motor Traffic Division of the army. When I got there, I told them, they asked ambulance man to go along with me. On our way, it was finished. The motor couldn't move. It was there I left him, with my bicycle I went home. The following day — those people who were crying have all died.

FO: Could you describe what you saw when you entered the square where the massacre had taken place and where these — could you give us a description of what you saw there?

FI: In fact, before you reach a place, you will find very — that is, you will find that that is the area, you know, people with different attire. It was just like a, in fact, I cannot describe it. It was a horrible sight to see the people there. So I got there until that time I met this ambulance, I said, I went out to it.

FO: Were there piles of bodies? Of dead people scattered around? Were they—were there women around? Soldiers?

FI: No, the women were not there. These are all men. Because the women were separated and taken to Maternity home.

FO: So who was in—so there were only the dead bodies in the square?

FI: Who?

FO: In the square where the massacre had taken place? Were there other — were there just those who had been shot were in the — you and those who had been shot, or were there other people in the square with you?

IU: When you got to the place, were there other people around there like you, who came to—

FI: No. No. I was just risking my life going here and there.

FO: Okay, that's important.

FI: People were afraid nobody come—never nobody comes out.

IU: Were you wearing your Red Cross—

FI: I was wearing Red Cross uniform.

FO: Okay. So, you were somehow hoping that the Red Cross uniform would protect you? Hoping?

FI: Yes, I did one thing. At a certain stage—we had a circle here (*points to shoulder*), the circle says Nigerian Red Cross. But at a certain stage when the Biafrans came in, they changed their circle to Biafran Red Cross, but I didn't change mine, so when the military man that saw the circle, would see it see belonged to Nigerian and not to Biafran.

FO: Right.

EB: Were you the only Red Cross officer in Asaba at the time? Were there other Red Cross officers?

FI: Almost all of them ran away, ran away. Almost all of them. Even—there was a woman I went to training with in Benin, he went across. I was only person. Then all I did, I started recruiting emergency members, that is to assist me. All the corpses, all the corpses in Asaba, I did the burial. Those corpses are scattered everywhere. I did the burial of all of them.

FO: Could you describe—so these would be all the bod—what about the bodies that were in the main square, the big group. Did you—

FI: Well, that one I did not do it, it's not me. It was after, when they have decayed, you know, smelling all over, the people there gathered and then dug a common grave and they started putting them there.

FO: And where—and the other bodies, the one you buried, were they buried by the families or—

FI: As I went around, as I went, as I went around, I saw some corpses decaying and rotting in all sorts of places. With the emergency recruit — I mean, the people I recruited, I used them to do the burial.

FO: And were they buried back—were they given back to their families? Or, where were they buried?

FI: No - where we saw corpse, we just dig ground under them and bury them. Anywhere we saw corpse ...

EB: Who were the people that you recruited to help you? Did they just—who were they?

FI: Well, the people—these are the people, the people that were hiding when these things happened. By the time they saw me bold coming out, they came out with me and they were just taking cover under me.

FO: Uh-huh. And was it mostly women, or some men?

FI: No, these are men.

FO: These are men. So they were hoping that your Red Cross uniform would protect them as well.

FI: Yes.

FO: How many people do you think you buried?

FL: There are so many, I cannot remember, and so many, so many, so many.

FO: Were some of these people, people whose names you know?

FI: I cannot know their names. Even, I came to police barrack area, I saw some policemen, shot by the army. I started doing the burial.

FO: (To Elizabeth Bird) Do you have a question?

EB: What about your own family? At that time, you were married, you had children?

FI: No, no I was not married.

EB: Not married.

FO: How many family—you lost family members, you said.

FI: Well, uh, three lgehs and my mother. Though my mother was not shot, but died as a result of prostration during that time.

FO: So there were three direct blood relations? Three lgehs were killed? And then, clearly, your mother of heartache, because she had lost. What happened after this? What happened once the killing stopped? What did you do at that point?

FI: When the killing started?

FO: When the killing stopped. Stopped.

FI: When it stopped, then we started rehabilitation, that is the — I went to the army. I asked them that they should be giving us ration, and they asked me to manage somebody who would be coming to collect ration from there. So I directed one of my cousins to go there, collect some parts of, um, cow that they kill, and then come to our place, we share. Because as I was in the, the reha—the army then they recognized what I was in, and then when I set up a clinic. There was no hospital, no clinic, nothing. But I set up one in my house. And to tell the truth about it, fifty, sixty patients. A doctor seconded three nurses to my clinic. And the one lady Principal of St. Bridget's, Miss Backhouse, also aided me, gave me some drugs from the hospital and all these things. So I was just doing some treatment in my own house.

FO: And you treated, you say, fifty, sixty, people?

FI: At least in a day. We treat not less than fifty, sixty people in my own house.

FO: A day.

FI: A day. In fact, all the rehabilitations, I did it.

EB: Were these people with gunshot wounds? They were shot, these people were shot?

FI: Some of them were with bullet wounds and some had ordinary sickness.

FO: Now, do you have any recollections about the second incident that took place around—in March of 1968?

FI: Well, it was, the second incident was the time they burned our house. What happened was that the Biafrans were encroaching, but they wanted to come through Igbuzo. When the army in Asaba heard of their coming, then they started killing people again in Asaba. Alleging that the Asaba people brought them in. They started killing people, many people are now murdered in Asaba, started burning houses and everything. They burned my own house already.

FO: Now, some people were moved to the college, though.

FI: Yes, that was a time—what happened was at that time, when they started killing people, I went to — some people came to me and we started thinking of what to do. We decided we should go to the headquarters of the army and ask them to remove people to St. Patrick's [College] so that if they could see, you know, that person, that would know he is from Biafra. But for the meantime, the people within us were led—they removed them to St. Patrick's and that was what they did.

FO: So this was not the army's idea, this was your idea—

FI: My own idea, yes. That we move—they went around Asaba, made announcement that the people should go to St. Patrick's College. Then, we went to St. Patrick's. I removed my clinic, these things, to St. Patrick's and I started giving them treatment and all these things.

FO: How long were people in St. Patrick's for?

FI: For about two months.

FO: And how were they fed?

FI: The army gave us food. In fact, all the food we were eating at the St. Patrick's camp was from the army. It was when the war ended that the relief materials started coming in from Caritas and the Red Cross, and other places. But all the food we were eating during the war came from the army. *[Actually, there were relief agencies operating in Asaba from 1968 onwards]*

FO: When these events were taking place, did you have contact with the Red Cross, were you informing them of what was happening?

FI: Yes, of course. During the war, they sent people from Geneva to us. One of the Geneva persons asked me to give him—to make a report and I wrote a report, he took it to Geneva. But they were hiding things, because they, if they [the Federal Troops] knew that I am giving them report of what happened, they would now, they would arrest me.

FO: So you were giving reports?

FI: I was just giving —yes, at that time. They took it to Geneva.

FO: And you were doing this secretly, so that the Federal Troops wouldn't find out that you were giving these reports?

FI: Yes.

EB: Um, just a couple things. If you could please tell us the full names of your brothers who died. We know Igeh, what were their first names?

FI: One is Tropical Igeh.

FO: Tropical.

FI: Another one is Sunday Igeh. Another one is Sunday again, who worked with NBC.

IU: Another Sunday?

FI: Another Sunday, yeah.

Unidentified male voice: Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation?

FI: Yes.

EB: You mentioned—you said that your mother, afterwards, was so—that she died—

FI: Uh, it was, it was—

EB: Yeah, we were talking a little bit about your mother and if you could, maybe tell us how it was for her after this happened. And you said that you think she really died as a result of this. Not directly, but, how was her life when all of this happened?

FI: The fact that, um, many of her grandchildren and children, that is relations, cross to Biafra and every time we heard of a death in Biafra, so she couldn't cope. The stories and all sorts of—all these things -- not a bullet, not a gun, just died of the stress and all sorts of things.

FO: Was she an older woman?

FI: No, not all that old.

FO: And how was your life changed, and the life of your community changed by this experience?

FI: Well, um, in fact I can't say that my life was so bad, because I started doing noble work, which was recognized by everybody in Asaba. So, my life wasn't as much bad as others that I know. It wasn't as much bad. But the little thing I know that I suffered is because of certain people, trying to save people and all sorts of other things. But I was just relieved with happiness that I am in a position to do it that I am doing, I did it. In fact, all these reliefs, all these reliefs, that is the reliefs for the victims of the war—was done by me and those people I recruited. After Asaba people have been withdrawn back to their home, they brought another group of people to St. Patrick's that I started taking care of. That was Igbuzo people, they brought Igbuzo people and I started taking care of them.

FO: So, do you think that is what helped you cope? The fact that you were able to help others?

FI: Yes.

FO: How do you think this event—what happened in Asaba forty-two years ago, how do you think it should be remembered?

FI: Well, this is, you cannot say that it should be forgotten. You cannot say that it should be forgotten. In fact, the way the people were massacred, the way the people were killed, nobody who saw the pogrom will forget it forever until he is dead. Nobody. In fact ... I am not feeling well with them, because of the way they treated us at that material time was so bad. Nobody can just forget it. It's not possible, it's not possible at all that the people should forget what happened.

FO: Do you think—what about future generations? Do you think young people today know, or remember, what happened here?

FI: In fact, the future generation, well, they can only know this by history, because some of them—many of the people here now are very young. Many adults during that time have died. The ones—the people we are with now are very young, they did not know much about the war, the crisis, the trouble. So, what I want to say to them, for Asaba people to forget what happened in Asaba is not possible. It's not possible at all.

FO: Do you have any questions?

IU: One question, you said the ambulance came for somebody, do you know who that person was?

FI: Yes, I know them. The lady who requested for the ambulance to come and carry her husband was from Umuaji, but being married to an Ogwashi-Oku man. They came to Asaba, probably to seek refuge before they killed the husband. But when they shot the husband, they took the wife to St. Patrick's [College], then it was there that the wife told them that the husband was not dead. But the army there directed that they should go and bring him. Before they could come, he had already died.

IU: Okay. You said also that Asaba people would never forget what happened.

FI: Yes.

IU: Yeah, but, how do you think that we should let the future generations know, after we are all dead?

FI: To know what?

IU: To know what happened.

FI: Well, it's just by stories, as I'm telling— saying now. Those people who probably can remember all these things, we still tell stories about it. We still tell stories about it.

IU: The person in the ambulance, do you know the name?

FI: No. These are the soldiers from the camp, the military camp.

FO: But who they came to pick up?

IU: Yeah, the person they came to pick up, what was the name? (speaking in Igbo)

FI: The lady from Umuaji was married to a man in Ogwashi-Uku, so they came to Asaba to seek refuge before the man was killed. I don't know the name of the man.

IU: Okay.

FO: Liz ..

EB: Just one quick question, please. You had talked about people going to Igbuzo and escaping from Igbuzo. Were people killed in Igbuzo also?

FI: Yes, of course, there's some people who were killed there. Some people were killed.

EB: They were civilians, too, the Federal Troops?

FL: Yes, Federal Troops. In fact, when they heard that some of the military men—I was up, I mean I came, from Igbuzo. Then they started—that is, in fact, they went there to kill some people, but they ran to the bush and they caught some people and killed them.

FI: Seven or eight kilometers.

EB: So this was all part of the same period, they were looking—they went looking for people in Igbuzo and in Asaba? The troops, would, they wanted to kill people there and people in Asaba?

FI: No, they came from—they wanted to come from Igbuzo, from Benin to that route, one of the—One of the bridges along the road was blown, so they turned around and they followed the Okpanam Road to Asaba.

FO: Is, um, (to Elizabeth Bird) are we done with our? Yes. (to Frank Igeh) Is there anything that you would like to add that we have not asked you? Is there anything that you would like to say that we have not asked you that you would like to add?

FI: In fact, I can only add if you ask me something, then I will remember. 'Cause I didn't write it. If you ask me, then I will remember what—

Unidentified male voice: Let me ask you a question. These killings that you saw during the war, how has it affected your life, that is, what part has it played—did it make your life to progress or has it let your life down? How has it affected your life?

FI: Well, it, actually, when I saw that I was doing all the things there, it brought a lot of setback to me. It brought a lot of setback to me. The war brought me down.

FO: In what way? What way, do you think?

FI: One is that they burned my house, I had to start living in the hired house, paying rent. I remember I lived in our mother's house, I was paying her rent, of all of the things. So when the people that should have helped me financially or to progress, they died during the war. So I can't say—the war didn't bring anything good to my life at all.

Unidentified male voice: Did you complete your education before the war came?

FI: Yes, of course. Actually, I was an adult. I can say I was schooling, no. That was the reason why I was able to belong to an organization, and did training, and be able to help others.

EB: Just one thing about the Red Cross. You told the people—you sent reports to Geneva, to the Red Cross, and yet, so they were getting reports that this happened, and yet the story of what happened did not seem to go further, they didn't, news people weren't informed, nothing. What happened? Did the Red Cross suppress this?

FI: Well, um, one of the relief officers called George Borriton (?) he asked me to write all these things and give to him, so I wrote it and gave to him. So he went to them. By the time he was coming, he brought only kit, the Red Cross kit for medical, that they gave Red Cross kit to me from there. In fact, all these things they were doing during the war, they were doing it secretly. So, just like that.

FO: Well, thank you, thank you very much for sharing your stories with us. We really appreciate it. Thank you.