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Interview with Amer Salihovic (FA 1137)

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Project name: Bosnia Project

Field ID and name: KFP2016IYB_0001_VSsr0001

Interviewee: Amer Salihovic

Interviewer/Recordist: Virginia Siegel

Date: January 21, 2016

Location: Western Kentucky University Campus, WKYU NPR Studios, Bowling Green, KY

Others Present: n/a

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Microphone:

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Transcribing Conventions:

Use of square brackets [] indicates a note from the transcriber.

Use of parentheses () indicates a conversational aside.

Use of dash - indicates an interruption of thought or conversation.

Use of ellipses ... indicates a discontinued thought.

Use of quotations “ ” indicates reported speech.

Use of *italics* indicates emphasis.

Use of underline indicates movie, magazine, newspaper, or book titles.

Names of interviewee and interviewer are abbreviated by first and last initial letters.

Time is recorded in time elapsed by the convention [hours:minutes:seconds].

[00:00:00]

VS: Okay, it should be recording. Would you just speak into that real quick?

AS: Hello, my name is Amer.

VS: Okay.

AS: Is it good? Okay. Is it recording?

VS: I think so, yeah, it's recording-

AS: Great, great, great.

VS: So this is Virginia Siegel and I'm with Amer Salihovic. Right? Did I say it right?

AS: Amir, yes. That's, that's pretty good.

VS: It's Thursday, January 21st, 2016, and we're in the Pioneer Log Cabin on WKU's campus. Um, so we've talked twice before, we've talked about your childhood and your family's transition to life here in the US. Um, and remind me again the year you moved to the US?

AS: 2001.

VS: Okay. Um, and you were born in '94, right?

AS: Yes, correct.

VS: So, um, you were perhaps too young to remember the war, but of course you grew up with an awareness of it. Um, so I guess my first question is how was the experience shared with you as you grew older?

AS: Um, well, my life started at the age of three, I guess, or maybe even earlier than that, uh so uh somewhere like age, age two or three, o- or as far as my memory goes back, so I, I still remember my first snow. Um, so my life started in winter, um probably when I was like two or three years old, and um, my parents would always talk about it like where I lost my grandpa, and uh here's a sh- my mom would always say, "yeah, he was um," [sniffles] he, like I really didn't understand fully like the Bosnian language, like any kids they would use big words and I'm- I was- I'm like baffled. First of all, I didn't even know Srebrenica was, um, the vision that I had in my mind was totally different than what actually, what it was, you know? Like nobody told me it was a city, you know? Older people didn't even think about it, you know? They're just like, "Yeah, it was the fall Sreb- Srebrenica," or something like that. Um, that's where he died, and I'm just like, "Fall of Srebrenica? What the heck is that?" Um, but even before that, I, I would always ask for my grandpa, like it was just like these, one of these um weird phenomenons where I would just um ask for him, like even when, when I would cry I, I- my mom would recall, she was like, "You would always ask for a guy that you never met, and you would cry about it. Like "where is he? Why is he not here?" Um, and it kind of baffled her because, you know it's like, "What's- why is this kid asking about something that we never necessarily told him about? Or that he, he's lost." [sniffles] Um, but uh, regardless of that, um, so yeah um, I think I was fully aware of the war, um, uh to some extent at a very young age. Uh, I think at the age of five, uh I made

my first visit to um, uh [00:03:00] as we like to call it, or um eastern Bosnia, where we're from, uh [00:03:06], um [00:03:09] and whatnot, so I remember like it was almost like yesterday, um, us going through those woods, um my dad um going to his child- childhood home where his parents lived, um us walking up those hills, um looking at those ruins of our uh well, first of my grandparents' homes, um then I remember my dad uh, I went with my mom and dad, uh to the fam- family graveyard, I guess, and um in, in the Bosnian tradition, or probably in the Muslim tradition so it's a lot like uh, um, it, it's not a community cemetery and it's like not, somebody's not taking care of it, so uh what my dad did, he actually cleaned it up, and I, I, I remember that. Then I remember um going and seeing where my grandparents' house was, you know where- I mean it wasn't there, you know? Just like the foundations, it was all shelled and everything but um, I remember that experience, and I remember when we went down um closer to the [00:04:16] River, that's where um our house was, so, uh, between uh Bratunac and Srebrenica. Um, if, if you take that main route, uh somewhere right there [00:04:29] and then uh we had our house, and um, um so we kind of went down the driveway and it was, it was shelled but it wasn't completely destroyed. It was shelled and um I saw it, and like you, you, you got up there and we would go onto the second floor, but my parents have already been, been there, you know? My dad already started building a new house, right behind it, and um I just walked through it and it was, like it was, it was, it, it was like nothing to me, it's like, "Okay, whatever," you know? It's not uh, "Oh this cool," you know? "Let me try not to like fall over this, on the, on the, on the second story," it's like, "okay." [00:05:10] And it was like you just see shells, like huge openings in the walls, like bricks everywhere, um my mom showed me where the kitchen was, like all the kitchen tiles, everything. So everything was cleaned out, um-

VS: Cleaned out? What do you mean?

AS: Like there was nothing there, you know? Everything burned down, so um, everything like no furniture, no nothing. There, there was actually furniture, like the old couch was flipped over and everything, like I never lived there, so it, it didn't have any meaning to me, or I couldn't actually understand what the heck was going on. Um, and then um, I remember, I think it was that time when we went back that my mom kind of dug up all the, that stuff that she buried. Um, so that's where like a lot of the dish ware, I think we still have some at home. Um, but it was like, it was very- my mom got emotional and was like, it was baffling to me, I was like, "okay, why is this lady crying? It's just a old house, you know? Yeah we used to live here, what's the big deal?" But it's like you, you don't, you don't even think about it as a kid, you know? It's like when you don't have like an en- like uh this huge emotional connection, even to the people, you know? So she, she already told me about her brother, you know, getting killed and uh everything, and it's like, "okay, whatever." And then like us going um- so me I was just like playing around these ruins, and uh going

across, so my dad actually built the, uh built a bridge across this little, I wouldn't call it a river, it's, it's like more of a creek. And uh I remember just playing around there and everything and uh I was like really proud of my dad because he built, like he was so good at building these houses and we had like a really nice little thing, and he created this concrete barrier beside the river, you know, in case of floods and everything, and I was like, "wow, dad, you know how to do stuff!" So yeah that's, that's, that's uh like, so my parents never disclosed it from me, you know? And um, I kind of support that, you know? There is nothing to disclose. Um, but yeah-

VS: You mean they never hid it from you?

AS: Yeah, none of it, I mean it, what happened is what happened, you know? There's, there's um, there, there was really no trauma for me because um it was like me learning at a young, young age, me really not have a connection to it-

VS: Sure.

AS: -it's like you're really not understanding it in the first place. So it's like if you a tell a kid at a young age, he's not gonna understand it, but over time it's something that's gonna interest him, it's something that he's gonna research, it's something that he's gonna finally comprehend. And that, that, I mean that was my logic. I mean when I look at, when I reflect uh reflect the better for like from today, if they didn't, if they hid everything from me, if they uh, like some Bosnian parents, say if, "you know, it was too dark for my kids to know, you know?" If they hid that from me, it would be, I wouldn't be here today, I would be taking a different story. Um, so, it, it's, it's one of those things that kind of defines what I am today, it's just my parents at an early age exposing me to everything, and me kind of just taking, taking uh, taking my own path of um discovery, you know? Finding out more, so it just kind of build this fire inside of me, and not necessarily in a, in a neg- in not, not at all in a negative way, um, not at all in a negative way. It just build uh a fire, a fire in me that um to this day uh one of my, [clears throat] my goals is um to bring justice to the people. So like li- life goals, I mean yeah, everyone want to be successful, everyone wants to do great things in life for themselves but there, there is more to that than just that. Um, so yeah my parents never, uh, never hid things from me, and I think that's the right thing to do, especially to, to kids that born either after or during the war that really can't recall anything, you know? Because that's the only way you're gonna build in something inside of them, and it wasn't like my, my parents were preaching me, "hey," or this, they just said, "the Chetniks did this. They killed everyone, blah, blah, blah," you know? We watched videos, we watched documentaries, everything, even at like age ten, age twelve, I was watching documentaries about the Bosnian War, I was watching those bloody footages. Like to us there's really not a PG-13, rated R, this and that, you know? Yeah, you're gonna

have nightmares or something but, um, you'll get over it, you know? It's not gonna traumatize you for the rest of your life what you see, you know? But it's gonna, it's gonna lead you down a path of uh, path of discovery, you know? Researching, seeing what actually happened. Um-

[00:10:20]

VS: So-

AS: And that, that's what my parents have done their whole life when it comes to that.

VS: Hmm. So you- they didn't hide anything from you, but did they tell you stories or did they just let you ask questions?

AS: No they told me stories, they, they made sure that um, I, I don't want to s- uh our like we're not nationalistic, we're not, we, we are proud of who we are, um, we are proud of our heritage, and that's what my parents instilled in me, you know? "Be proud of who you are and where you come from, uh no matter where you are in the world, um, and never forget your roots." Um, so that's something we focused on, and it's just like a past time, instead of watching TV or even during conversations with like people that come over to our house. Like when we were in America from 2001, so in 2001 I was like seven, [sniffles] um, so every time somebody would come over like a uh relative or a friend, um that, that's, that's, that's the talk over coffee, or that's the talk during dinner, you know? It's, it's all about the Bosnian, the Bosnian experience, what happened during those years, the experiences even prior to that, you know? So it was part of my life, even to this day, you know? There, there isn't- like Bosnian is part of everyday life all the time. Events from '92 to '96 are still talked about in 2016, so it, it's no different. So um, we don't, we don't forget, and um I, I'd like to keep it that way, you know? So don't forget, you know, even for my kids it, it's something that I, that I'm thin- mostly likely gonna expose to them at a very, ver- very early age, um, just so they know. Um, so, that, that's, that's my history. Um.

VS: Are they- do- are there any memorable stories that like stuck with you?

AS: Well, um, I guess, um, to me or what my mother has revealed to me when it comes to like uh my mother and father, when it comes from a [sigh] personal side, I, I guess more personal to the family, um, my dad has um told me stories about the war. Um he went uh after we evacuated the family to Tuzla, so into um the Bosnian controlled territory, um so I was born in '94, um so I guess let's, let's start off with just the memorable ones. My mom always tell me like, she gives me a hard time uh when I'm not like being considerate or something, or being uh, uh not listening to her or not following her instructions, she would

always like remind me that, that she walked so many kilometers with me in the belly [slight laugh] and now look what I'm doing. So she g- she always uh, through forests and I'm not like, I, I don't think she's exaggerating one bit of it, and um then she would uh, the, the next youngest uh with is Indiram, that's my sister, she's in Atlanta right now, uh she has her family down there, but she's the next youngest and she's like, "and you over there," and I always remember she's always picking on her too, she was like, "you were so lazy, I had to carry you on my back, while having this guy in my belly," you know? So it was like, it wa- it was just uh something funny, you know? It's like something to giggle about. Um, [sighs] then she would talk about my birth, how, how I was like born in like the frigid cold, the middle of the winter, uh in Tuzla, and um I guess that's- I, I like those happy stories. Um, then when it comes to my dad, well uh, he has some of the more bloodier stories, um since he was kind of on the front lines. Um, um, he wasn't like, like going in there shooting people but he was, he, he was on the, like probably he was shooting at people or something in the woods, but um it was toward the end of the war, he was on the front lines um in eastern Bosnia, trying to defend what was left I guess. Um, and, and that's it, so it's um, then even to this day we're, we're receiving stories, um from people about um that saw my, my uncles and uh [sigh] you know they're, they're telling us, you know, "yeah we saw him there, and then at this time," and it just brings back these memories, you know? [00:15:12] It's, it's, it's sad, and uh even when my grandpa was found they sent my uh, well the, the uncle that survived, they sent him like all his, everything, all. like whatever- so like when you- they find your remains there's also clothes on you and jewelry, and so um, they have his like um cigar box and um, um he had to have his Tesbih. Uh so um, in the Muslim tradition um, or during Muslim prayer, so you have these beads, right? So there's thirty-three of them, it's called a Tesbih, and you would use that to count um so like uh recitations, like "God is great" or um, or what- whatever you're reciting, you know, to do it thirty-three times. So they found that, um, some few documents here and there, you know, some money, and uh they returned it to him, you know? So it was with him when, when he uh, when he was killed, so um, and that's that. You know it's...

VS: How many people did you lose in your family?

AS: Um, immediate? Um, so uh, so let's just say, so not counting cousins, we're not gonna count cousins. I lost two uncles from my mother's side, uh so yeah, so two of my mom's brothers, one brother from my dad's side, my dad's dad, so that's three, that's four. So four from like immediate, like four within the family, and when you branch out into the cousins, [sighs] I, I would think over, over fifty easy, like easy. If, if I, if I took um like the ten cousins that I have in Bowling Green and just said "who did you lose?" That, that- or ten, twenty cousins, how, how much ever family I have here, or, or worldwide, *easily, easily*, with- without a doubt, more than fifty. Because um, a lot of these um older guys are living without dad because they, they were lost there, so, easily um, easily fifty. Um, I'm, I've asked for like an

exact number [slight laugh] it's, I mean personally it's too much to, um too much to count. But um, I bet if I want to Potocari and just counted the graves I wouldn't- we just walk, walk through the graves with my mother and she could probably point them all out, to some extent. So, sad but true.

VS: Um, so I was going to ask if you had any objects that your family had brought with you from Bosnia, but actually would you speak a little bit more about um the objects that your mother had buried, I mean before they-

AS: Yeah, I, I, I think we still have a lot of the silverware, um, a lot of that stuff is still with my sister in Bosnia, the one that stayed behind. Um, she has a lot of that. Um, we, we, we probably do still have some here. Um, but like what I can remember it's, it was pretty much silverware and some pictures, so I only have one surviving baby photo, just one, and that's it. And, to the say the least, I wasn't the best looking kid, but um [laughs] no, I was pretty good looking, back in the days, much better than I am today. But um, yeah it was just, it was mainly like um the silverware and the pottery, and all this stuff that they saw of value. Money wasn't really, yeah I don't remember money, maybe they did, I don't know. But I, I, what I do remember is just um there was a lot of silverware and some pictures here and there, and um, it was buried beside some tree across the river. Um, my mom was- no it was um, I thin- I think what was really um, so my, one of her uh, one of her brothers built a house really near to where my dad built our, or then the family house, and I remember my mom got in a heated argument with the Serb family that just kind of came in and took over, you know?

VS: Took over your brother- your uncle's house?

[00:20:01]

AS: Yeah, because it was vacant, because, I mean, there, there's not nobody there so they just kind of um, that's what they do. They, they did, you know? Especially after the war, and it was like, and, and, and my, I remember like her just being really mad and I kind of remember but I was off in the distance, you know? When that it kind of happened. But what, well like even when she talks about it she's like, "how dare they?" it's like, "they have his, like his, his blood on, on their hands," you know? "How dare they do that," you know? But um-

VS: Was this an uncle who had, had, didn't survive?

AS: Yeah.

VS: Yeah.

AS: Um, so yeah, I, I only have one, one surviving uncle, out of the, out of four. Um, but-

VS: So you'd, you'd said when you went back your father had started rebuilding the house, that was where you were, your family was originally from. Did you say that?-

AS: Yes, um, he started rebuilding a house there. He made the first floor, he was about to start on the second then he just kind of gave up, and um I think that's when we, that was a few years before we moved back to America, because of just, just the issues, um political, political turmoil. I mean we, we could have, we could have been out of Bosnia much earlier than that, but um uh what I do respect about my father and what I do respect a lot about him, um [sniffles] he's a, he's a man that's, that's gone through a lot, a lot in life, and uh sometimes uh I don't appreciate that as much as I should, uh or I don't respect that as much as I should, uh because my, my dad he is very like, he's a very tempered man, especially after the war. Um, he, he goes off really quickly and um, but um when, when uh, when he talks about everything that he's done, or even, even why he did, why he made some of the decisions, um, very the, the guys, the um to, to say he's a coward or anything would be a disgrace. He, he stood, like if, if, if I said that, "yeah, that's what I would do," or "that, that's what any rational human being would do, or somebody that loves his people and what he is, would do," I, I, I would say that's my dad. You know, I'm proud of everything that he's done, every single thing that he's done, and uh I love him for that, I honestly do. Um, sometimes we don't get along, my dad is sometimes really hard to get along, but um, man I love that guy, to the moon and back, just because of all the sacrifices that he's made for the family, and um for his country. Um, he lives in the United States right now, but um that, that is always his country, and that, and to me, even though I'm an American citizen, um the motherland is always the motherland, you know? It, it's something that, [sighs] it's something uh I, I guess that it's, that it's that animal inside of us, you know? It's um, no matter what, what, what you're like where you are, you always go back. And I, and I love this country, don't get me wrong, I love this country, I would fight for this country, but um, there is something about um, so it's like uh I guess like Salmon, you know? That they're born in one stream or on one river and no matter how far they go away, their mothers die, leave them there, then okay, so they float back into the ocean, they go across this whole big ocean, and they always come back to give birth, in that same exact place where they were. And that, that, that's I, I, I think God or a higher being, I mean I, I believe in God, so um I guess that, that's uh, that's something innate to us, you know? Some, something that we're just, we, we always go back. Like when, when I landed first in Bosnia back in 2006, it's, it's like just this feeling you're, you're at home, you're- you've been uh, you've been away for so long but you're at, you're at home. Like the, the air that, the air that you breathe is like fresher, even if it's not it's still fresher because you're in Bosnia, you know? It's Bosnian air,

like you don't care. The trees, everything is greener, everything is much nicer, even though it's like shitty, you know? Economically it's trash but it's, "yeah." You know? That, this, this is where, this is where I am! This is where I was born. From this matter, from, from stuff that was grown in this soil, and it's um, it's a great feeling. It's honestly a great feeling, and uh I, I think no matter where you're from I think, I think that's something that, that you should always, always no matter where you are in the world, you should always be proud of who you are and where you're from, at all times.

[00:25:07]

VS: How often have you been back?

AS: Just once.

VS: Just once?

AS: Yeah, just once. Um, [clears throat] my, my family like um I always tell them, uh tell my parents, um they came here at the wrong time I guess, and my dad he ti- sometimes takes that to an advance, you know? He's an older guy, he's like, "yeah I couldn't learn all the stuff you, you kids learn. You know, I could become- " but we managed, you know? My dad's been like over there six, seven times, but I've like uh, I've, I've only been once. Um, I, I would've gone back earlier, I'm thinking about just uh going, probably after I graduate, for a few weeks and whatnot. But um, it is what it is, like life is always busy over here, you know? That, that's uh, that's, that's the American lifestyle, we're always on the run, always doing something. Um, yeah but, but I long for it, like I wish I could go back just, just to see my, my, my family and just, it's, it's, it's I don't know how to even describe, describe the feeling. It's like here like you get like ten Bosnians in a room together and it's like, "whoa, yeah!" We're, we're talking and then you hear like Bo- Bosno-English, you know? Like you say a few sentences in Bosnian and then you're like one English word, and you're like, "oh, I caught that!" You know? So it's really interesting, but it's, it's, I think it's all of us, we all have this um, this excitement when we- but if, but if you're in Bosnia it's like, it's like Bosnians everywhere, like, "oh man, let me go talk to everyone," you know like every, everyone is like super freaking awesome, you know? There, there's no filters, you know? In Bosnia there's no filters, you can say whatever the hell you want to anyone and it's like, "what's up, dude?" You like, to anyone! Like here it's, "okay, that guy he's mean-mugging you, better not talk to him," in Bosnia it's like, "hey, let's go." You know? Whoever. It's just that Bosnian mentality, you know? When, when, when everyone's like from the same, the same nationality as you it's like, it gets pretty exciting, so. And it just feels like you're at home everywhere you go. So like you're at your own house wherever you go, no matter

where you are in Bosnia you're at your own ho- house, it's like, it's just, it's freedom, I guess, I don't know. It's really cool.

VS: Well I think you told us early on, or someone had mentioned that hospitality is like extremely important.

AS: Yeah, ah gosh! Hospitality is like, it's something we're born with, um [laughs] it's huge. It's like you got a Bosnian house, I swear like if, and, and I, and I was always baffled by it, I'm like, "come on, mom. You- why, why are you doing all this stuff?" It's like bring the coffee, bring the food, bring everything, and it's like that's a lot of work, and nobody's paying me to do it, I'm like, "I ain't doing that," you know? So it's like people don't even ask, you're like, "here, here, here, here, more, more, more, more, more." Let's talk for like three hours about useless stuff while we're drinking coffee, eating cake, and all, all this stuff. So it's like a fiesta every time someone comes over. So there's no like, I guess a casual gathering, you know? Like it's always a party, always. No matter, no matter what it is, it's always a party, and that, that's, that's the Bosnian hospitality, that's the Bosnian way. And usually people don't argue, people don't get like hurt about stuff, you know? Everything, everything is up, up in the air, you know? Every, everybody's open about uh everything. So yeah, it's, it's, it's something unique, it's something that people should try to experience once in a lifetime. But it, it's kind of hard if, if uh, if you don't know the Bosnian language, or it's kind of hard to fit in. If you don't, if you can't fit in, then you know, people aren't as like- if, if there's like a stranger in the room it's like "uhh, should we say anything? Are we gonna make them feel really bad?" So that, that's what, what we're good at too, it's like making fe- everyone feel included, but if you try to make feel like everyone feel included than it dials down on the Bosnian-ness um, or the Bosnian atmosphere that could be there, you know? So um, yeah. So really cool, really cool, really cool stuff.

VS: So, when you get together, are you a fan of singing? Did you tell me you were a fan of singing?

AS: No, see me and Denis, [VS laughs] um, um, so yes, I'm a very big fan of singing. Um, it's something that uh feeds my soul I guess. So if you ask anybody that has ever known me, uh who I am and what am I known for, it's just, I'm always the happy guy, the overly happy joyful guy in any room or in any uh, you know, with anyone. [00:30:10] And me if I'm happy, man, I, I bust out in song, like just, just spontaneously just start singing, you know, here and there. Or I would be repeating the same line of the song that I really like for like three, four days, you know? And people would just get annoyed and they're like, "Come on, Amir." But uh, what me and Denis do, and that's why I always say, "hey, me and Denis, you know, we, we can take care of that," um, is um, we, we're part of the choir. So like in

Islam uh there's religions uh I don't want to call it music, um it's called the Ilahia, or Nasheed I think uh is the Arabic term or whatever, I'm not sure, um but it's like spiritual vocal singing i guess, um, and me and Denis do a lot of that. I could actually show you a video later on, but I, I don't have my iPod, it was on my iOS device. Denis probably would like hate me if I showed you that but [laughs] um, but yeah we do a lot of that, and uh we've been doing it for years and years, and um it's part of our Muslim, Bosnian Muslim culture. And um, yeah, it's, it's, it's really cool and uh I enjoy it, I'm like a huge, huge into music and so are ninety-nine percent of Bosnians, you know? So there's no, like especially like folk music, like especially like this Bosnian pop, man like you get a concert here or like some Bosnian singer come, you, you'll get the whole community out there, you know? Supporting them, and you know, and dancing along, singing, all of that stuff. So, it's, it's, it's culturally we're like pumped about music. I mean so, so, so is uh the American culture, really no, no, no different, maybe the genres are a little different but we love rock and roll too, believe us. Like every, every rock song that you guys, or that any famous um, um rock persona in the United States has down, there's a Bosnian version. Uh-

VS: Really?

AS: I swear. Uh you, you should hear um, I, I'll play this uh maybe after the interview. So uh there's a Michael Jackson song, um "They don't really uh care about us," or, or something [hums the song.]

VS: I think I know what you're talking about but I can't-

AS: Yeah.

VS: Yeah.

AS: Yeah, I can, I can show you, it's really funny, and it was about um, I think it was about the um, the children in Africa, right? Or something like that. Well, well Dino Merlin, which is a guy we mentioned in uh one of our uh sessions here. Like the most famous Balkan, he was not just like the most famous Bosnian musician, but he's like the most famous musician in that whole region. Um, he wrote a song during the war, with the same tune and same melody, he just like literally ripped off Michael Jackson, and we don't care, we're like in the middle of a war zone, who cares? Like, you know, we don't, [laughs] what are you gonna do? Copy like call the copy write people on us? Sure, go for it, see how that goes. Uh, and he wrote a song about, you know, the world really not caring about us, you know? And just about the, the Bosnian War, and, and it was like more of a like motivational thing for the people, you know? To, to, to lift their um, to boost the morale and get them aroused, you know? To defend their country. It was like um, so like one of the, um, the main

punchlines in the song is uh, "where were you when Bosnia needed you the most?" So, even like through music during the war, it was, it was, it was a huge thing, and the same artist he uh wrote a song about uh Alija Izetbegović, which, which was the first Bosnian President. Um, he wrote a song about him after he died, um, and I'm pr- and uh the, the main uh, or one of the verses um, um if I could transl- let me, let me think about how, how to translate this. Um, "my- this garden- our, our garden would uh not, not um, um, be so bright." Neb- so like the Bosnian goes uh, [sings in Bosnian]. So, uh our, I, I guess, "this land that you see, Bosnia, wouldn't be so beautiful right now, um, and I would call, I would call uh sun, the dark, if it wasn't for you." So like daylight would be darkness to me if it, if it wasn't for what you have done. Um, and, and I kind of uh support that, uh I, I, I support uh the policies and uh what, what uh this Alija Izetbegović, the President, uh the first President of Bosnia and Herzegovina, um, did for the country and for his people, even prior to that. [00:35:17] Uh what he, what he did um he was jailed, um in during Yugoslavia, Tito's Yugoslavia, um for, for pretty much just what he wrote, like literature he wrote. He was um, he was a scholar, he was uh, he was a smart guy, and uh especially when it came to human rights and everything, um. Uh even to the Islamic world, he was an example um if uh, if by any chance you ever get a chance to read um his um, uh I forgot what the book was called, Islamic um, um, this is where we get the um- and this is uh people have criticized him for this without actually even reading it, right? Um, and, um, it's a really good book.

VS: What was his name? Can you spell his last name for me?

AS: Uh I-z-e-t-b-e-g-o-v-i-c.

VS: Okay.

AS: So um, so it was called "The Islamic Declaration." Um, he wrote it um in uh 1969, and it was published in 1990 in Sarajevo. Um, so um, so basically I'm just read a quick summary. It presents his views on Islam and modern- modernization, um, uh so just, I, I, I guess how, how Islam would incorporate into the modern world and how that, how that actually was possible, you know? Um-

VS: So he was the first President. When there was this divided system of government he was the first Bosniak President?

AS: Yeah, Bosniak President, um, even before that um in '92, when we were, we were separating from Yugoslavia, he was the first. Then the Serbs were like, "oh okay, we've got our own," you know? "Blah, blah, blah," yeah you just have to, i think the, the best thing for anyone to do is just uh look at the history for themselves, um as far as uh what happened uh,

because every story is kind of biased, no matter how, how, how much, how uh, how, how hard we want to deny it, but uh there's bias in everything. Um, so um, yeah, it's definitely something to look into, um.

VS: What about music?

AS: Music, oh gosh yeah, music that's, we're all about music. Bosnians live it, love it, we live it and love it, we love it live it. And um, okay um, so uh when you look at Bosnian uh so what my dad likes, uh I guess this is the best way to describe it, he likes the old tunes, uh something called Sevdalinka, it's a very laid back type of music, it's, it's similar to jazz in the sense that it's like really slow and rhythmic. So that's what uh Sevdah is, Sevdalinka, Sevdah, uh same thing. Um, very traditional music, um and it's, it's, it's historic music too because the lyrics actually kind of make sense, you know? There's effort in them, um, there's rhyme and it's really poetic, really beautiful, sometimes it tells a love story, sometimes it tells a heroic stories, sometimes it tells um, uh I, I guess a, a national story about a people, you know? The Bosnian people and it's really beautiful, beautiful music, really beautiful music. Um, a lot of Bosnian youth they don't appreciation in it but I, I love it. Um, and um, so that's one side, uh mainly for the older generation but it's, it's, it's bringing a comeback, there is a comeback of that music. Um, uh what we like, the youth really likes the pop, the Bosnia pop. Uh, Dino Merlin, um, and all this stuff, and that, that music is usually just about love and how she dumped you, and all this like [slight laugh] stuff that we guys can relate to, [laughs] since girls are always doing the dumping I guess, I'm not sure. But every song is about like, "oh, she left me," you know? Like and, "I'm depressed, oh God." [00:39:59] [slight laugh] Uh and then you have uh the Bosnian folk music, or narodna music as we like to call it, it's not really folk music like what, what you hear here, but it's more like toned down pop and it's like also just about depression, depression, drink a lot of alcohol, depression, depression. Then modern pop is like women, women, women, alcohol, alcohol, alcohol, drugs, drugs, drugs, you know, just same thing that it's here in the United States, and um, and the only musician I actually respect is Dino Merlin, he's the most popular in the whole region, right? But in none of his songs does he actually give like, tell anyone to do anything bad, it's based on his life story, he doesn't tell anybody to shoot anybody up, you know? Or all of this stuff, if it's a heartbreak, you know, he's like, "yeah, but, but I managed through it," you know? Or like the songs are all, really all uplifting, and everyone can relate to them and no one is getting this bad advice to do all, anything bad, you know? "Don't get drunk, don't do this, don't do that," you know? It's just, you know, I can relate to it, but um all this other crap like all um people listen to, it's just like, "okay, whatever guys." As long as I have Dino Merlin, you know, life is good. Everyone else is just like poor translation or people trying to make money to me, that, that's it. But I love music, I love all music. Um, ah a weird thing, shoot, I can, my dad, you know, even though he's a really Bosnian guy, you know? He listens to

these ethno-Serbian um history um, um history songs, or whatever, they're called uh Gusle, are the people that sing them. And it talks about like Serb history, like important figures and it kind of glorifies them and kind of like denounces the Muslim figures or whatever, but this is like through, through history, like history history, like hundreds, hundreds of years, you know? They, they tell these tales, you know, and uh my dad actually likes listening to them because he uses that and then he can tell a story, you know? And my dad, he's a really uh, he loves to read and uh just like he's a history freak, especially about that region, you know?

VS: So like ballads kind of?

AS: Yeah, yeah, something like that. Yeah, I think that that's what the, the English for them, but they're like sung, they're sung. Um, what, what are they called? Um, sung songs about, sung heroic songs, what, what would you call them?

VS: Yeah I guess a ballad.

AS: Yeah.

VS: Yeah.

AS: I guess so. Um, ballad or ethnic, ethnic songs, I don't know. Yeah, I guess so. I thought there was a fancier word for it?

VS: Probably. [slight laugh]

AS: Probably. We're not english majors. Maybe you are, I'm not sure.

VS: So, but, but that's more of a Serbian thing? They don't, you don't have Bosnian-

AS: unh-unh, unh-unh.

VS: -ball- I won't say ballads. [slight laugh]

AS: Yeah, let's just call it ballads. Yeah, no, no, uh, uh maybe some, some, yes, but not in the way they do it.

VS: Mhmm.

AS: They do it in such a particular way and it's so screechy and annoying, like, like it's like I've, I've never heard a Bosnia song sung like that, but it's really like people that shouldn't sing sing it, right? And it's done with this instrument and it's like so screechy, like if I could just play you an example right now, but I'm not going to. Um-

VS: What's the word, what is it called in your language? Does it have a specific name?

AS: Um, here let's see. I'll have to figure it- uh let me see if I spelled it, yeah spell, spell it correctly. Gusle srpske, so right here. Um-

VS: How do you spell it?

AS: Uh, g-u-s-l-e.

VS: Hmm.

AS: So I, I'm just gonna play a short clip of this.

VS: Okay.

AS: And it's like annoying. [VS laughs] May- maybe you'll love this stuff. Um, but it's like about their heroes and stuff. [music begins] Yeah, you see, like that, that's a Chetnik right there.

VS: Okay.

AS: So that's, this is, this is like the other guys' motivational music about- and like they even have um, just recently- you see, you see this guy right here?

VS: [unclear]

AS: Yeah, you know this guy.

VS: Yeah.

AS: So they, they write about their heroes, right? So he's a hero to them, you see?

VS: Yeah.

AS: All of them start the same way, and when you get like halfway- [music comes back in]

VS: Oh, interesting.

AS: -like, like just. [music continues] You see they're, they're singing?

VS: Hmm, interesting. [00:45:14] [music continues] So if that's in- [AS turns music off]

AS: Yeah, so they're talking about, you know, probably how he butchered everyone and how they're all so super proud of him. Um, but um, yeah that's, that's their little heroic music, even though it's, I don't like it, um-

VS: Well that just made me- so that made me think of another question then, would you, um, speak to your language? So that would, I, I assume that Serbian would be a different dialect, but your dad would be able to understand it just fine because it's in the same family of languages? Or?

AS: Okay, I, I've had debates with people regarding um [clear throat] the Bosnian, the Bosnian language, which came first, right? [Sighs] Um, and uh I always say, the Bosnian language, uh so what they tried to do um in Tito's Yugoslavia is um they tried to eliminate the Bosnian-ness, you know? Even though we're, we've been a country since like what, um, let's say the eleven hundreds, you know? The Bosnian, the kingdom of Bosnia, right? Uh, King Tvrtko, or whatever, whatever you want to call him, um, whoever, um, um, so you, you would assume that that's uh, I guess uh, a language, right? Um, and you can fact check me on this, the Bosnian dictionary was the first dictionary in that region, in that whole region, so no one, no one else had like a dictionary.

VS: Mhmm.

AS: We were the first ones out with a dictionary. The Serbian dictionary was written a copy of the Bosnian dictionary, and then they call- then they said the Serbian language was first. That's what they tried to do in Yugoslavia, you know, it's Serbo-Croatian, "Bosnia, who cares about you guys?" We believe that it was um, okay if it's from the same region, you know, call it the Balkan language or something, but the Bosnian language is a mix. The current Bosnian language is a mix of uh old uh, old uh, old Bosnian, like back from the eleven hundreds, and uh a mix of Turkish, Austrian, whatever uh, whatever other empires influenced us. But it's like uh bread we call hljeb, and the Croats call it kruh and the Serbs call it something else, you know? It's like you say tomato, I say tomahto, I say tomato. Like so some of those weird things, but it's like, it's the same language. Um, but we, we, it's still debated today by scholars who was first, you know? [slight laugh] Um, but um, so uh.

VS: What would you prefer that your, your language be called?

AS: Like 1611 the Bosnian printed, the first Bosnian printed book uh, uh, yeah. So 1611, uh 1631, so no one else had a language, I guess a defined language, so I, and I, I, fact check me on this. Um [slight laugh] but it's something that's very uh highly debated by scholars, and uh, so um, ehh, you know, we, we like to say it's um, we were, um so, so we use uh a lot of metaphors from like the Turkish language, the Arabic language and whatnot, but it's just like certain words, you know? It's "sabah," to indicate that it's, you know, that's a Turkish word for like um early morning, right? So we just use that, you know, or, or something else, and, and, and they don't like that. But um, but, but I would say, I would say, that um, that we are the, uh, I'm not gonna call it the B- that, that we were the first, but uh history suggests that um we, we were the first with a dictionary, I think.

VS: Well so if someone asked you today what language you speak, what would you say?

AS: Bosnian, a hundred percent.

VS: Bosnian?

AS: Hundred percent.

VS: Okay.

AS: And if they told me, if they told me I speak Serbo-Croatian and that I'm, that I'm wrong, I, I, I would uh, uh vigorously deny and um I, I would uh pull up some historical references to tell them that they're wrong. [00:50:01] Prove to them that they're, they're utterly wrong and their, uh I may call them ignorant, at one point in that conversation.

VS: So, I guess going back to your personal experience, how much in, in your daily life, like with your family do you speak mostly Bosnian? Or do you speak English or-?

AS: Oh with the family, mom and dad, Bosnian 99.9% of times, and unless I'm trying to joke around with them, with the English words that they do know. Um, but um, yeah so. Um, uh what am I doing research for right now? [VS laughs] Let's put the phones away. Yeah, um, with friends it's a Bosno-English, as we like to call it. Bosn-glish, um, so it's just like we say something in English that we switch over to Bosnian, because um we've been here most of our lives, and English is where we're distinguished in English, apprenticed to proficient in Bosnian, you know? I'm leaning toward the distinguish um side, because I'm just really exposed to it. I've translated before, done all this stuff, you know? So I'm, I've, I've kind of been um conditioned to do it. Um so, I know how to speak in the different, you know, um different regions, I mean I know how to speak like a Croat, like a Serb, you

know? To change my dialect here and there, you know? Um, but um, but yeah, uh with friends and like with my siblings, English, you know, sometimes, but it's Bo- Bo- you know, Bosnian is never excluded. Anywhere you go, and if an elder hears you speak in English they always criticize you, they're like, "what are you doing? You, you- did you forget your mother's tongue?" You know? They wouldn't- low key insults, you know? They would, they would say it with a, with a, with a smile but they'd be like, "speak more Bosnian, kiddo. Don't forget where you're from." So yeah.

VS: Hmm. So you- that- you mentioned your sisters, so you have a sister in Atlanta and a sister in Bosnia?

AS: A sister in Bosnia, one in Bowling Green, and one in Charlotte, and one brother here too, in Bowling Green. Um, so a big family.

VS: Yeah.

AS: Big family. And we're all, except the brave one that actually stayed behind, and uh I respect her a lot, uh which is my sister, Mevlita, [spelling?] who's in Bosnia. Hey, you know, she, she's living, you know, it's, uh she's not living the best life. She got married before we moved here, so it was kind of not, not, not her um fortune, I guess, to be with us. Or um, but um, she's, she's living a really good life in Bosnia, even though it's shitty economically and um, maybe we can exclude that slur of language right there. Um, it's, it's a really bad economic situation in Bosnia, uh socioeconomic situation, so people are still sometimes not getting along. Actually the people are getting along fine, it's just those politicians that are always um starting fires that never existed before, so, there you go-

VS: Yeah.

AS: -that's what it is in Bosnia.

VS: Well, you actually touched on one of my other questions, it was gonna be when you- how many times you've traveled back, um I guess, more just would- is there anything else you'd like to say or things that you think is important to include, for us to know? About your culture? You know, art, anything.

AS: Um...I think something um, if, if, if I wanted to say everything it would, it would take uh a long time, but um, from a historic standpoint, Bosnia has been a country for a very, very long time. Um, we're one of the oldest peoples in Europe, I'm not going to say in the world, uh but in Europe our roots have been planted for, for a long, long, long time. Um, we've been the example of- we're a great example of diversity and inclusion, um, so just people

getting along. I think Bosnia is, is an example to the world of um how si- how societies can co-exist, and, you know, when there's no external factors. [00:55:05] Um, when there's no greedy politicians or there's no global powers trying to influence their, their um might on the, the people of Bosnia. But um, it's a people that the world should be proud of, it's a people that the world should um get to know better, because we can set an example, um, like, like we said about the hospitality and everything, how to treat your neighbors and how to interact with people. We can set an example to the world of how to do that, in, in a way where it doesn't- you're not offending anyone. In, in a way where you like everyone equally, no matter if, if they're Serb, Bosnian, or Christian, Muslim, Jew, whatever they are, Black, white, Asian. Where we're just that, the- we can set an example of that. Um, so historically we are a people, and to this, to this day we are still here. Um, the Bosnian people are, are still here, to this day. Um, you identify yourself as an American, where three hundred and fifty million people identify themselves as an Americ- as, as Americans, and they have been identifying themselves as Americans since three hundred, or two-hundred and thirty, forty years ago, but we've been identifying ourselves as Bosnians for um, for more, for about nineteen hundred years, maybe even earlier. So histor- uh historic records, let's just say, let's round up two thousand years, um, so we are proud of who we are, and our history, and um, and we, we love to share that with the world, and our main goals, even what I'm doing today, is to make sure that the world doesn't forget, because there, there is people that are wanting that, you know? But we are, we are telling the world to this day that we are still here, we have been here for a long time, and that we intend to stay. From '92 to '96, even prior to that, so nineteen hundreds, where this whole past century has, has been a, a, a really um hard time for us because a lot of forces have tried to eliminate that, you know? Who? The Bosnian people, the people that have been here, that have survived for such a long time, and not a lot of empires survive that long, and I'm not calling us an empire, but not a lot of people survive that long, you know? You're either called something else or you're, you're called Germans now instead of whatever you were called a hundred, two hundred years ago, you know? Or Americans, you don't identify yourself as Germans or where, wherever, or the English, or whatever. But we were there for a long, long time, and um the past one hundred years there's been continuous efforts to erase us from history books. First to erase us as a people, and then erase us out of uh, out of history. Um, but we're, we're re- re- we are reluctant, and um we will not allow, uh no matter where we are in the world, um we will not allow for people of wrong intention to do that. Not, not because we're nationalistic, not because um we hate other people, it's because we love the world. We, we love our people and we love the world, and we love life, and uh we love the good things that uh humankind uh is capable of, and capable of, capable of doing, and we, we, we set an example um to the world. We're not saying we're the only ones, but we're there. Um, we've survived eleven genocides, um people trying to kill uh, um, kill us off, do this, do that, erase our identities, even to this day they're trying to um a semi-cold war, I guess. Um, trying to eliminate what, what is, um trying to cause

corruption, trying to cause mischief, in ways that um it, it may not be with a knife, it may not be with uh a gun, but it, but it's happening to this day, and it's a battle that we're continuously um fighting and willing to fight, um, until it stops. We're not here to cause injustice, we're not here to cause turmoil in this world. [00:59:59] We're trying to live here in peace, we're trying to live in here in harmony, and uh, and that is it. There is not interest, um, that, that's- our interest is happiness for all, and that's, that's the Bosnian interest, that's the world interest, that's what everyone's interest should be. Love thy neighbor as much as you'd love yourself, I guess. Um, and if uh we're gonna throw in some of that, but um, that's who we are. Um, we're people of rich history and we intend to, to save it. We, we are not just gonna be people of the book, we're not gonna be something of past time, we will never allow, allow that to happen, um, because first and foremost we don't deserve that, no people in this world deserve that. And um, the Bosnian people will always stand um with the underdogs of this world, and any, any county in this world that [sniffles] that, that is being persecuted based on uh religion, or ethnicity, or race, we, we will always support those people. Um, no matter if it's Palestine, no matter if it's uh a Christian country in South America, no matter if it's anywhere in the world where anybody is being discriminated against because of their religion, ethnicity, race, gender, they will always have the Bosnian people behind them, because we've experienced that. Um, so, I guess that's, that's what I would love, my, my closing statements.

VS: Well wasn't this- I was actually giving you another closing closing statement. Is there anything else you'd want to add about your own experience?

AS: My own experience?

VS: Of your experience from, you know, moving here, or any, you know.

AS: Um...uh, from my experience, huh.

VS: Is it- any.

AS: I guess sometimes I, I, I think about things um, I always think about things that I could do more for my country, you know? Um, I'm a, I'm an American, I'm an American citizen and uh I am part of a, I'm a, I'm Bosnian-American um, so I have two homes, um, two countries that I call home. Um, we're fortunate in this country to have a lot of successful people, um and I, I, I always wanted to see how, how we can build relations more. Um, so it's not just me, it's uh a lot of people fornor- uh for- foreign origin actually do this, try, try to help out, in, in best way they can. So I guess from all my experiences uh, throughout my life, um my Bosnian experience is, is what defines me, um even in America my day to day actions are defined by my Bosnian experience, my Bosnian upbringing. And something- what, what

people have to understand in this country is that we are a country of immigrants, and no matter how, how much we think we are different, we are all the same, and it's, and it's uh in, in one way or another. Um, we have a lot of similarities, so we're just uh a mixture of things, so um [clears throat] I just kind of want to, because I, I, I know I'm gonna be part of this society for a long time, um, and uh my goal is to somehow bring that Bosnian experience. Uh so there, there's always like positive effects from the African American experience, or the Irish experience, or the English experience, you know? Everybody brings their little quality to the table um that makes this country great, you know? Um, that makes it what it is today. Um, so even the Bosnian experience, we're doing that on a, on a daily basis, the Bosnian community in America. We're, we're shaping America in ways unseen, you know? As our kids grow up, you know, their influencing their friends and uh people there they put themselves around, or they, or people that they put around themselves, you know? Um, so in that manner, like the way I behave or what I do, or somebody things uh this characteristic of mine that is maybe uniquely something that we do, you know? They may pick up on that and it could bring a lot of positivity to society. Um, so I guess that, that's, that's one thing from my experience, so sharing my experience I guess is really important to me. [01:05:04] Um, but yes uh, I, I love, I love Bosnia. Bosnia it's uh, it is my mother, my second mother, or my first mother, depends on how you look at it. Um, and uh I will do everything in, in my power or what I can uh to make sure that there is uh prosperity uh within that country, that there is justice in that country, and uh that um, a new, a new age or a, a new day, uh or I wish to live uh, I wish to live to see the day when um, when you can walk down the, um, that road in eastern Bos- or eastern Bosnia, between Bratunac and Srebrenica, and to see all those houses rebuilt and people actually, people that were kicked out, um either their kids or, or some of their descendants living there. So I, I want to go back there when I'm really old, drive or walk down that, that, that street, or go to Srebrenica, go to all those places where people were being butchered and, and um, just walk down those streets and hear a laughter and hear, hear happiness, and see prosperity. And see cars parked in front of driveways, and, and see kids playing around. So that, that is, that is my closing statement.

VS: Okay.

AS: I guess um, I want to, I want to grow old and I want to go back to my, to, to the place where I was born, and walk beside those rivers, those same rivers that were once filled with blood, I want to walk beside those rivers and I want to see kids playing. I want to see families being happy, and I want my country to um lift from the ashes, be the phoenix, and um, and I believe there is potential to, that there is very good potential that we can do that, and I believe that it's gonna happen, but it's all, all to uh, it all depends on us. So um, the Bosnian people, um because uh a lot of times um you can't really rely on the world. Um, change will uh, so uh, so in the Quran there's um, God says, you know, "God doesn't bring, uh, so

nothing falls out of the sky, " and especially for people um change will only come to a people if they truly want it, and if they truly work for it. So um, I think if we truly want change, if we truly want prosperity, if we truly want a better day for our children, especially in that country, um in this country, any country in the world, you're gonna have to work for it. And I think as um Bosnian, uh first, first and foremost as a Bosnian and then as a Bosnian-American, um, I will try my best to make sure that um my uncles, and my relatives, and all my fellow Bosnians didn't die that, or that um the blood that is drenching the Bosnian soil to this day, that it, that it wasn't just uh, uh I want us to come out stronger. We still haven't come out stronger even twenty years after the war. We're still forgetting, but through these little things that we do, um, one day, God willingly, it's, it's gonna happen. It's gonna happen.

VS: All right. Well this concludes the interview. Yeah.

[01:09:01 End Track]