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Interview with Amer Salihovic (FA 1137)

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Project name: Bosnia Project
Field ID and name: KFP2015IYB_0002_VSsr0001
Interviewee: Amer Salahovich
Interviewer/Recordist: Virginia Siegel
Date: October 21, 2015
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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: Alright, so this is Virginia Siegel, I'm here with Amer Salahovich?

AS: Correct.

VS: Great. Um, this October 21, 2015. We're in the Pioneer Log- Log Cabin, here on Western Kentucky University's campus in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Uh so, just to begin, tell me about yourself. Your age, profession.

AS: My name is Amer Salihovic, um, I come from Bosnia and Herzegovina, uh, I moved here in 2001 with my family as, um, as uh, immigrants of um- or dis- we were displaced by war, um, that uh, occurred in the Balkans from the year 1992 to 1996. Um, I've lived here since 2001, uh I attend Western Kentucky University. I am currently, as of today, a Senior Electrical Engineering student um here at Western.

VS: Great, great. So um, and you said you moved here from- in 2001, was that directly from Bosnia or- ?

AS: Yes. Yes, directly from Bosnia, um, we got a- we got the option um two years prior to 2001 either to uh go to New Zealand or the United States, and uh, since we had most of our family living in the United States we opted to go to the United States. Not really knowing which one was which, um just based on some brochures that you got, and um,

just from seeing what uh- seeing things on television, so. But mainly just because we have already had family here, we already had connections, and um, that kind of motivated us to come here.

VS: Mhmm, yeah. Well um, let's talk, maybe let's backtrack and talk about your childhood. Tell me about your family, and memories from your childhood.

AS: Well my, my first memory, I guess this uh, this memory is where my life begins, um, was probably in nineteen ninety- 1997 or 1996. And it was in uh, uh the new town that we were displaced to, it was in the Federation of- modern day Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. So you know that Bosnia split into two entities, um, the Serb-Republic and the, um, the Federation of uh Bosnia and Herzegovina. We lived in a little um, I'm gonna call it a village, a little village called Tinja, um by, uh in between Srebrenik and Tuzla, which are um bigger cities, or bigger municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Um, but as far as my first memory, it was probably January, and um, my life pretty much started outside playing and building snowmen. Um, I did not know what was going on, I did not know how, what happened two years, three years prior to that first memory, to, to where my life began. Um, but I remember laughing, I remember having a good time. Um, we didn't have much but, um, I guess happiness uh at that point wasn't even um, it was just the snow. It was just the snow falling on your face, it was um, it was that deep Bosnian snow. um, that was something that you always remember. Um, but yeah that was my first memory as far as um the child- my, my childhood goes. [sniffing] Um, afterwards, uh, I didn't know my father until- my first memory of my father um was probably a couple months after that, and um, he seemed like a stranger to me because I felt like I've never seen the man before in my life. Um, so I was born in 1994, he was out [sighs] in the field- a battle fields, um, close to the, toward the end of- towards pretty much the end of the war, and um, him and my brother [snapping sound] were actually part of the, part of the group that was supposed [snapping sound] to go into S- the Srebrenica enclave, but uh somehow things got shifted around and they ended up going um to other places. Um, but to re-track, um yeah my first memory of my father, he, he was um blooded up. Um, he was actually in a car, car accident, um, and I think um I got that memory when he was coming back from work, uh, he would, he would have to go to work in Croatia, in a neighboring county, in order to provide for us. And when he came back, I think he uh, he was involved in his second or third uh semi-truck accident. So he wasn't the driver, he was just in a car that happened to hit a semi-truck, and I just remember my father being really bruised up, and um his face was all like wrapped up and uh he had stitches and what not. And I would just always hide behind my mother, because I, I didn't know who that individual was. Um, but as I grew, you know as days pass, you know, you, you understood that childhood bond that you have, you know? [microphone sound] I, I knew I have seen him before and I, I, I knew who he- like in some sense, but I, I didn't know like um, exactly who this stranger was, but um that was my first memory of my father. And for some reason, uh, one of my great- like one of the things I always did as a child, and I don't know maybe my mom told me like, between the ages of one and two was um- I would also call out to my grandpa, which I've never met in my life, and never, never seen. He died during the war, uh he died was- he died uh in Srebrenica. He was part of the, um, eighty-three hundred that were, were- eighty-three, eighty-four hundred or so that were killed, or maybe eighty-seven, I'm not sure. See I'm kind of forgetting things today, but um, I would always call out his name as if I, knew, knew him. [00:06:37]

[Sniffing] As if he existed, but it was kind of strange for a kid that never heard of his grandpa just to [snapping sound] call out, um, call out this individual he's never met, never heard of, and you know, it's um, it's one of those things you have to have faith in, and faith in higher beings, and um, to actually understand fully um what was- why a child that was maybe two or three was asking his mother where his grandpa was, and you know, so. And um, well back to the childhood. [Sniffing] Um, my- I, I guess when our- when I think about it, the only time I've actually been free or felt free in my life was the first seven years of my life in Bosnia. Um, I, I guess people don't understand what it means to have something. Until, until you possess nothing, then yo- then you find out the true meaning of what it means to actually possess, possess something, you know? Um, I remember my sisters always telling me that when I was a baby they would have to like go out, because I was born in 1994, in the winter, and, and the war was still going on even though we were a safe zone in Tuzla, um, food was still scarce, you know? And there was embargoes, there was um people stealing food, you know, peop- people trying to make uh wartime profits, um, all this stuff. So I remember my sisters always telling me they would sometimes have to go and beg for food, in order to feed me and keep me alive, and keep me going. Um, but yeah, Bosnia was only uh my, my first seven years of my life before I moved to the States, uh, to this day I feel like that was the only time I had freedom, with the true uh, true meaning of freedom. And um, freedom from everything, freedom from social judgement, freedom from capitalism, freedom from television, freedom from everything. It was just you, your environment, and you were the main actor, every single day, and you chose whatever role you wanted to play. Nobody was influencing you, it was just you, in a land that was torn by war, in a land where you lost so much but, but yet even though you had nothing, you had freedom. I think free- true freedom is only understood when you have nothing, and then you just take what you have, and you just run with it, you know? You have nature, you have all, all of these things, and I just remember as a kid I, I would climb the- like I was a six year-old m- pretty much a monkey. I was climbing these huge trees and my parents were like, "Okay, whatever." And I still ask my mom to this day, like, "How would- why would you allow me to do such stupid things?" And it's like, "I don't know, now that I think about it, it probably wouldn't have happened," but man, we had so much freedom in that county. [00:10:18] Like when you have nothing is when you understand what freedom actually means, and then...yeah. So ch- childhood is something I really, really- it's very um- that memory is dear to me. Um, because now we live in a world, even though we um- like in the United States for example, I love this country, you know? I'm an American citizen right now, [sniffing] um, but I just feel so much pressure every single day, about everything. The way I dress, the way I walk, the way I talk, every single thing is um, is being judged, is being looked at, I have to follow certain standards. Um, so I- to, to say I feel freedom, I mean there's book definitions of freedom, there's, there's the Constitution, but that- that's uh, I don't, I don't think that's that that's freedom, because so many things are just enslaving us, each and every day. Um-

[00:11:29]

VS: Do you mind like talking about what like a daily- what like a day in the life of when you were a child would look like? I mean and tell me about your siblings-

AS: A day in the life, a day in the life-

VS: -things you do, that sort of stuff?

AS: My siblings were older um so I never really- I always looked up to my sisters, um, well actually they just looked after me, so it was just kind of in the moment all the time ch-

VS: How many?

AS: Four sisters, one brother.

VS: Wow.

AS: Yeah, so it's, it's a big family. Um so basically a day in my childhood would um, um, when I was out of school something- I, I went to first grade in Bosnia, um, but prior to starting school it was pretty much wake up, eat something, and just go, explore the nature. You know like we had a, we had a- I had two very good friends, um, one was named Bach [last name] and the other one was named Aliatroich, and um, we were so close, and we would always just run around and do like the craziest things, things that I would never even allow my kids to do. Um, just go explore in the forests, everywhere, you know? Ju- just, and it was just like the greatest experience ever. Greatest experience ever because you actually, um, you'd go out there and you'd see these things and you'd look at them, and you observe them, or you climb the tree or you build bow and arrows, because you don't have anything so you're just always innovating, you're always making your own things, and that makes, that makes life a little more special. And that was basically pretty much everyday for me. And I've always had a special um connection to the Bosnian winter. Bosnian winter we- winters were something that uh, um, the greatest experience ever, because every time it snow you know you're gonna get um six or s- uh f- five or six, not five or six feet, that's a little too much. Let me think about this. Probably three feet, I'm saying that because every time I would walk into the snow I- it was literally up to chest so I'm just consider it like looking at myself now and I'm six foot, so um maybe a little out of proportion but, but yeah that, that was one of those experiences. You would walk in- into the snow and you're just- pretty much the only thing poking out is your head. And I think, like one of the things that we always did as a group, we would b- make our own sleds. And it wasn't just like those typical sleds, we called them motorcycles because they only had one center um, once uh- so they were out- made out of wood and a piece of metal that was running toward the center like it was um- and you would just slide down the hill, and they were so, so fast. It was like faster than any sled anybody ever had, or anybody ever had or any bod- any other kid in the neighborhood had. And we would just constantly do that. And bows and arrows [snapping sound], man we would [exhale] we, we would just like it- it's not like it- that, that you can make a bow and arrow. Can you make one that can shoot, shoot um, sh- sh- shoot an arrow like so many like feet in the air? And it was, it was always a challenge, and we always challenged ourselves to do better, make better things. [00:14:51] Like even the basic things, like playing uh cowboys and robbers, I mean w- we couldn't afford like, like actual plastic guns and whatnot, so we made our own, we improvised. We used our imaginations, we used twigs and stuff like that, that just looked- resembled guns, and you would just do your own thing, play tag, play soccer. Even soccer was a funny experience because the only thing we had was these like inflatable balloons that would just be blown everywhere, everywhere by the wind, but they ha- they were like a little thicker, and they were like three marks at the local market or whatever. So three marks is like a dollar, and like if on- once your parents bought you that you were like, "Oh man." That was like the greatest, the greatest thing ever, even though it's like nothing, but it was the greatest thing ever. And like you would play soccer and after like two games the ball would pop

because it was a piece of shit, so. Um, but still, like when you- even that was the greatest luxury I've ever like got to own at that, that time, you know? And, yeah it was crazy. Or we would like, we, we would go hunting on the train tracks. And we would just like line up rocks, which is kind of illegal in this county, but we would line up rocks on the old track and just hide in the bushes. Um, although further away as the train goes by, you know? Not knowing that it could potentially, you know, cause some damage, but it- nothing ever happened. Um, but yeah we were always like doing crazy stuff. I remember when um, well actually I think that what's always going to remind me of my childhood is my pinky. [00:16:35] Um, so in Bosnia like we, we didn't have any like local heating or air-conditioning units at our houses. We were kind of displaced by war so we were actually living in houses that were abandoned by Serb families and whatnot, and uh, um, and so we, we would always have to go out to, into the forest, cut our own wood, and firewood and whatnot. So our parents- me and Bach had- one of friends, um, our parents were chopping wood by our house, um so it was like two-story- two-story house, his house was next to mine but it was like two families living, uh, in one house, one on the first floor, the other on the um, um second floor. And um, so what happened was that there was this log that kept on falling over, just like a, just a little log, and we were chopping wood and we were like six year old, six year old kids with axes, which is a really bad idea in the first place but yeah, who cares, you know? And uh nobody is looking on us, so we're, we're like, "Okay, we're gonna help these guys out. We're gonna show them a thing of two about chopping wood." And so there was this log and it just kept on tipping over, tipping over, so Bach was like, "Hey man, you know what you should do? You should hold that log up and when I swing, just release, and then I'll cut it, you know? So it doesn't fall over." I was, "Uh, i don't want to do that man," but after, after a few persuasive minutes we finally persuaded me to um, hold it. So the way I held it was to uh, to try to avoid any injury, I was holding it with my pinkies. [laughing] So um, yeah, as predicted, he swung and my- missed, and he chopped my pinky off. [laughing] Um, so, even though it's kind of gross, but a- at the moment I was just in shock and I didn't feel anything, you know? It was like- it was a quick one, you know? Um so my dad rushed me to the hospital and they- they're like, "What happened?" "Well, my pinky is just hanging by the skin, what do you think happened?" So they were like, "Okay, let's get you back here, let's see if we can save it." So uh, so they someone managed to sew it back on, and um, at the hospital where I was born, um in Tuzla, and um, I actually remember meeting a man there, and this is like creepy stories in my life. He had the same exact cut. He told me it was going to be all right, and the only thing that I remember about the man is his hand, and it w- on his right hand, his pinky looks exact- looked exactly like what mine looks today, and he said it was gonna be okay. And I could never like take that moment or memory out of my head. It's a- I mean, it's just like these creepy things that happened in my life are just like either deja vu's or, or like *Back to the Future* type of things, but it was like that guy, that man was standing there and he told me it was gonna be alright. And he just showed me his hand, he was like, "You see? It's gonna heal, it's gonna be better." But the, the thing that was rea- that really struck me, even- that thing stayed in my memory, and as I healed, and then as my finger was fully functional again, it looked exactly like his finger, on the same [tapping noise] hand, and it was just like one of those moments. And then it was a younger gentleman, who probably like in his mid-twenties, and that, that always like creeped me- I mean not creeped me

out, it was just like, "What's going on?" You know? [00:20:32] Um, but yeah, child- my childhood was um, just, just freedom. I did anything and everything. School, even when school started it was always like, "Yeah, I go to school, um," and my parents were heavy on the schooling, my sisters always helped me out. Um, I was a really good student um in Bosnia. Bosnia's- Bosnian school is kind of tougher than uh here in the states. Um, but I was a really good student, and the worst thing I, I think, I think the worst habit I picked up during my first grade, or something- a trait that I noticed then and there was that I talked a lot, like a lot, and um, sometimes man, I, I remember like in B- in Bosnia like you had, you had finals in first grade, right? So the teacher, it was oral finals, um, I mean m- math finals and all that stuff was already done, you know? You handed all your papers in, excellent, I got all like you- our grading scale went from one to five, it was like all fives, everywhere. Um, last subject, last test comes and it was a verbal test about religion, aced it, aced it. I was like, "Okay," I sit down and start bragging. I was like, "Yeah, man." My teacher's like "Amer, be quiet." No, no, I wasn't gonna hush, I just kept on talking and talking. She's like, "Okay, uh, so instead of a five, it's dropping down to a four, and you can go wait outside the classroom." So [laughs] that was the first time I got in trouble, and w- when I told my parents, it was like [laughs] oh did I get it, I got it big time. But um, yeah that, that's when I discovered my biggest flaw I guess [laughs] which is talking too much.

VS: That could be a good thing.

AS: It could po- potentially, potentially. But yeah um, my childhood was something very, very, very special. I guess it's the only time I ever felt freedom.

VS: Mhmm.

AS: Wh- wh- my definition of freedom.

VS: Mhmm.

AS: My definition. Um, so it's not maybe a politically correct definition of freedom, but I don't th- I, I don't think you can define freedom un- un- unless you've felt it, so, I think I felt freedom for the first seven years of my life.

[00:23:02]

VS: I was gonna ask, so in first grade, how old would you have been in first grade?

AS: Uh seven.

VS: Seven? Okay.

AS: Yeah.

VS: I was wondering if that was about the same as here, I think it's about the same, yeah.

AS: Yeah, yeah, it's- yeah, exactly the same I think. But yeah, even, even school was like less pressure. It's- it was a really chill environment. We didn't have any of the fancy stuff, we just had our green board. I mean it was, it was a decent school. Then you would have like your- you would just do the regular courses, math, reading, um, history, religion, and afterwards we would just go outside and play, play, play, you know? I actually still have my report card, I honestly do. It's like in Bosnia they have- they give you these um, these like really nice booklets that they put down grades, and you're supposed to like keep them throughout your whole, you know, schooling career, and uh, I still have that. And [laughs] I sometimes open it up just to look at that B that I got. It wasn't called a B, but um-

VS: The four. [slight laugh]

AS: Yeah, the four, just to remind myself [laughs] to relax a little bit, talk less, [slight laughter] sometimes. But um, yeah it was so much adventure, so much, I mean, [train in the background] if one word can summarize it it is just, it is pretty much freedom. [train whistle] Freedom when you- when you're not pressured by anything else, when, when you can't even, you know, when you *can't* be pressured by anything else. When, when you get your first TV at the age of six, like one year prior to going to America, it's like, "Woo-hoo, I just got a TV, I really don't care." You know? I'd rather be outside running around, [train whistle] exploring, you know? Playing soccer, making stuff, you know? [train whistle] Chasing cows, chasing chickens, you know? And it was all uh, it was all there. It was like farm life, but it wasn't farm life. It was, it was like, "It's your world, [train whistle] do whatever you want with it."

VS: Well I hate to say it, but we're gonna have to wrap it up [train whistle] for the day, so thank you.

AS: No problem.

[00:25:14]