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## Interview with Senida Husic (FA 1137)

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**Interviewee:** Senida Husic

**Interviewer/Recordist:** Kate Horigan

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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]

KH: This is Kate Horigan, I'm interviewing Senida Husic, and we are the Ivan Wilson Center for Fine Arts um on Western Kentucky's campus in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Today is November 2, 2015. Um, thanks for joining me again for a follow-up interview, Senida. Um, I wanted to start by asking a few things that you mentioned last time and I wanted to ask some more details about them.

SH: Absolutely, well thank you for having me, and I'd be more than happy to answer as much as I, I can.

KH: Okay. Alright, um, so the first couple question are actually about your parents, so-

SH: Okay.

KH: -um, one thing you had mentioned, and I love this detail, is that your mom baked coffee beans. [laughs]

SH: Oh yes, yeah, it's a, it's a fairly um traditional thing to do in Bosnia, especially in the villages, um, because people don't have access to stores as frequently as people in the cities would. So what they would buy is like raw coffee beans and then they would bake them, um just like, you know, the stores in the, in the city would. But it was just the process of doing it, and knowing how to do it right, it was, I guess it is a skill that women attained over the time.

KH: And is that something that your mom has taught you how to do?

SH: Um, it- we did it um back in Bosnia, but when we moved to the States we really didn't because it's so hard, in the States, to find coffee that's not already baked. [laughs] It is just, there's no, you know, there's no need for it. And another thing is um, in Bosnia there's this really neat machine apparatus that grinds your coffee, and you know, you would always have fresh ground coffee when somebody comes over, and that's just, it's just an aroma that you can't replicate, you know? I mean there's really good quality coffee, but it's not ground at that very moment when you are about to make some coffee, so. And we actually brought a couple of those um here to the States, just to have as, you know like little um, I don't know, sentimental things that kind of tie us back to our heritage.

KH: Um, [Senida coughs] thanks. So the other thing that um I just kind of was thinking about after our last conversation was um that you were talking about your dad, your father-

SH: Mhmm.

KH: -and how he worked as a machine operator in the mining industry.

SH: Uh, it's more like a machine technician.

KH: Okay.

SH: So what we would do is he would go around and, you know if the machines would break down, he would be the one to fix it.

KH: Okay.

SH: Mhmm.

KH: And then can you clarify, I, I was a little confused about his role-

SH: Mhmm.

KH: -in the conflict, because I know you were saying he wasn't officially part of- ?

SH: Um, he wasn't part of like the army, um, and that was just kind of my, my take. Um, at that moment people would say, you know, "that is our defending force," but it's just people who, again, when we talked a little bit about what an army is, and what those people were was not essentially an army. They were not trained, you know, organized, armed, equipped, and all that good stuff. Um, they were just people who were protecting their family and friends, and their houses, their homes. Um, so my father, I mean he was there with us um until '95, or July of '95, he was pretty much there, but he had to, you know, leave for a day, or two days, or sometimes even three days, um, to be with these people,

to help protect our city or where we were, wherever we were at that time. But also he would go and like do work so that he would get paid in like food, because, you know, there people really didn't care about money, because you couldn't buy anything anyway, so your money was useless. I mean we had money before, but your money was useless because nobody is taking money. It's- it was just an exchange of goods, you know if you needed milk then we will sell you milk for coffee, or we will sell you milk for flour, things like that.

KH: Okay.

SH: Yeah.

KH: So he was doing a [SH coughs] combination of working and exchanging, to get food to exchange-

SH: Yeah, yeah.

KH: -and then also um participating in this, in this civilian defense?

SH: Civilian, yeah, I, I would call it a civilian defense-

KH: Yeah.

SH: -force group, whatever you would like to interpret, yep. And then in July um 1995, when things- they looked, they were obviously bad, and um, you know we all knew what the Serbs were capable of and what they had done in previous towns that they'd sieged. Um, how, you know, they torture people, how they kill people, how they mutilated people. I mean they knew that they couldn't, you know, meet that more or let them find my father or my uncles, so what most of the men did that were capable and able to walk, um, so we're talking about age fifteen-ish or so, up to, you know depending on your um health and well-being, you know there were men that were like seventies and they went through the woods, is what we called the- you know, it doesn't, [sigh] it doesn't translate literally "through the woods," but essentially that's what it is. I- I- It's, you know, you're just evading or escaping and the only place that you can escape the city was through the woods because, you know, that's kind of easier to, to get through because the city, it was kind of like a valley, so there's a lot of hills. Um, and what they would do is they actually, you know all these, the civilian defense um group or, or force, um they um got together a few days before, you know 7/11 and they're like, "Things are gonna get bad. We've got to figure out a way to get out." [00:05:39] So they, they kind of mapped out a way to get out, and what they did, essentially, is they waited until I want to say either the ninth or the tenth, um because the eleventh is when the Serb forces officially overran the town. Um, so I think they left either the night before or the, or two nights before. And they essentially walked single-file through this path that, you know if you live in- if you lived in this one town or one village, you knew where there were no mines, you knew where from the surrounding hills you won't be seen. Do that make sense? So they'll be like leaders who knew the area a little bit to help you guide. So essentially that's what they did, and you know, we're talking about like thousands of people. Um, there were still- and Serbs were armed and they even had like helicopters so they found them and like

ambushed, in several different areas. And this is where you find like mass graves, in the surrounding areas that were dug up to bury the bodies that they, you know, were able to capture.

KH: Wow. And your dad was part of that? He was-

SH: Mhmm. Um, my dad, um, and uh two of my uncles, and then uh my cousin, my uncle's only son pretty much, he had two other daughters. Um, neither one of my uncles nor his son survived but my father did. So, yeah.

KH: Wow.

SH: It, it, it's pretty intense, um, then on my mom's side um her brother didn't make it, so it, it's, it's a lot to think about, and just imaging what they could've gone through is just, it's a nightmare. [coughs]

KH: Is that something that your dad talks about? The walking through the woods.

SH: Uh, no. Um, he actually never really wanted to talk much about it to us, to the family. Um, and I don't, I don't think he even talked amongst his friends that went through this because they all have um what people would call survivor's guilt. Um, and you know, a lot of our people suffer from PTSD, um some on a lot larger scale than others. Um, and so that's one of the things that my father didn't really talk about, but I remember, I want to say it was maybe two years ago, three years ago, we took a family trip to Florida, and as we were coming back, so we had, you know, a week to relax and just kind of, you know, just enjoy life and breathe. Like [exhales] we like to say "breathe" when you're like literally just are able to sit and just breathe, not thinking about anything, not having to worry about anything, not do anything. And we're coming back through, we were around Chattanooga, and you know how there's that one road that takes you through the hills? And I don't know what it was about that path that really got him to kind of talk about a little bit of what he had gone through, and uh, you know, he, he told us a few things and I mean it's just- like we had this very relaxed, you know, week, and now we get to like get a glimpse of really what he went through and it, it was, it was, it was hard, but at the same time it was very, like a great bonding time because he was able to finally like open up a little bit about what had happened, because before he just would not talk about it. And we didn't really ask because we knew it was hard for him, um to talk about just because- and [slight laugh] to add more misery to agony I guess, um his uh brother, his younger brother didn't make it and his older brother, and the older brother was wounded, and uh he tried to carry him.

KH: Oh.

SH: Yeah. [coughs] And he was like a, a heavier man, so he carried him for a while and then till he couldn't carry any more and my um uncle was wounded in his leg, around his hip area, so his leg was, you know, kind of like just limping. Um, and I think my father went to get medical aid or something to help tie the leg together and get some food and water, and, or just, just get any help, you know? Anyone that he knew that would help him. And when he came back, he couldn't find him. Yeah. He had set him um up against a tree and told

him to wait, and then he never found him. So I totally understand why he doesn't, he can't talk about it.

[00:10:25]

KH: Yeah.

SH: Yeah. So I mean I even, [laughs] I can't even talk about it because I mean I can't imagine living [laughs] through those days, and then years later, you know, knowing that you tried to do something but that like, you know, it, it kind of, you feel like it's your fault, but at that same time you did everything you could. So, it, it's just a very, very heavy burden to carry.

KH: Absolutely.

SH: Yeah.

KH: Wow. Um, and was that, that was, that was his older brother that he was-

SH: Mhmm.

KH: -carrying? And was that an uncle that-

SH: My father is second to the younge- to youngest, um, so his youngest brother didn't make it. Um, the brother that was- so there's three brothers that were uh, uh older than him, um, the *oldest* did- was not in Srebrenica. Um, the one after him was the heavier set one that got wounded, and then the one after him that was before my father, was not in Srebrenica either.

KH: And then, was that- were those uncles that you knew growing up in those years before [unclear] ?

SH: Mhmm, yeah, and there's actually uh one more uncle um that's, that's kind of like third in line. So my father is fifth in line, there were six brothers.

KH: Oh okay.

SH: Um, so the, the second in line was the one that was wounded.

KH: Okay.

SH: [coughs] Uh, yeah, because while I was seven, um, well actually not even seven, maybe um six or so because I didn't start school normally, you know? I was all- start school first grade at least at seven um years of age, um but before the war, like I knew them, but not a lot. Like, you know, when you're six years old, you don't remember much. Um, so the youngest uncle, and my mom always likes to talk how he much- how much he loved us, and just really liked spending time with us, um, I don't remember a lot of him, but after the, after the war and all of that, [coughs] the, the second in-line uncle I don't remember almost at all. Um, and the other uncles, we were able to reconnect later on after the war, and, and get to know them a little bit more. Um but th- th- the second one, I just don't even remember what he looked like. So it's kind of sad but being so young, you really can't retain, especially with everything that happened. [laughs]

KH: Of course.

SH: Yeah.

KH: What was his name? The one who, who your dad carried?

SH: [coughs] Safo, mmmm. And his son's name was Sadeo. So they liked to have like rhyming names in Bosnia, which is really strange.

KH: Hmm.

SH: Mmmm.

KH: So how did that co- I mean, so you were talking about how they went into the woods,-

SH: Mmmm.

KH: -um, how did that come a- I mean w- were there, I've heard kind of different explanations I guess-

SH: Mmmm.

KH: -of the history of that, of how the UN was involved in that, and-

SH: Mmmm.

KH: -you know, what was your, what was your family's understanding of what happened? And whether people were trying to help protect those men or not, or- ?

SH: Are you talking about at that moment? Like as everything was happening, or now?

KH: Um, both, I guess.

SH: At that moment, um, remember we're completely cut off from the rest of the world.

KH: Okay.

SH: And we don't know what was going on. [coughs] And I was fairly young, so I definitely didn't know much of what was going on, but what the general understanding was around me and surrounding my family was that the Serbs are out to get us, the UN are there, but they're just there just to be there, they're not really doing anything. Um, especially because they are not allowing food and aid to come through, you know? And UN being UN, that's one of the things that, you know, we're not getting firearms through, we're not getting- we're getting, you know, necessities to survive, to live. And I mean we had our hospitals ill equipped, people suffering, people in pain, people wounded, I mean. So that was the general understanding, then we had UNPROFOR there as well, and they were kind of peacekeeping people also, and, you know, people didn't take them seriously.[00:15:02] So when this- the people of Srebrenica saw that the Serb forces were moving in with their big tanks, and big guns and everything, I mean just imagine chaos overtaking because, you know you had these people here [slight laugh] but they're just doing anything, I mean, you know, it's been two years. Our condition, situation has gotten worse, so then what do you do? Pretty much. [coughs]

KH: And then is that different now from your thoughts about what was going on? Or-

SH: Not so much.

KH: Yeah.

SH: Um, I don't know if you follow the work of the UN, but um, and it's funny my sister interned there but she has kind of, you know, mixed emotions about the UN. [coughs and apologizes] But um, there was a resolution to pass um for Srebrenica genocide, they did not pass it. Because one member vetoed, and that was Russia. So after all these years, they can't agree that a genocide happened. That's all, just the genocide happened. So-

KH: Wow.

SH: -that just kind of tells you the scope of the UN.

KH: Yeah.

SH: [Coughs] And, and, and you know, how much they go for justice and for protection, and for truth, pretty much just the simple truth. So.

KH: Um, well this might be something else that's hard to talk about so, um-

SH: Sure.

KH: I- but you had-

SH: I'll do my best. [both laugh]

KH: You had mentioned, um, [SH coughs] last time that your, your house was looted and burned and that that was really-

SH: Mhmm.

KH: -heartbreaking, especially because it was, your family was just building this new home-

SH: Yeah, unfinished. [slight laugh]

KH: -and it was a big beautiful home-

SH: Mhmm.

KH: -that you were very proud of, um-

SH: Yeah.

KH: -so can you tell me a little bit about what happened with that home, and, and how you found out about it?

SH: I have um, I've never seen it, after the fact. My mom and my father have, but I haven't. [coughs] And I think the reason we found out that it was burned was that someone in that general vicinity was going back, and by going back after they have fled their home essentially they're risking their life. They don't know if they're gonna walk over a mine, they don't know if they're gonna find Serb forces in their house, you know? Just in their house living, you know? Using it as shelter for their army and whatever. Or even if you found families, um because what they did to, you know, the, the point of everything was to cleanse it of Muslims, and then repopulate with Serbians. [coughs] And, and it's funny because that's essentially what they, what they did in a lot of different towns is as the forces would be moving in, there would be a convey of people moving behind them to just resettle these houses. And then that was a big huge ordeal afterwards, um, not so much in villages that were kind of isolated, and our's was a little isolated, but more so in like cities, where people, you know, the whole family wasn't killed and someone came back and they're like, "You're living in my house. This is my house." So, um, but [coughs] yeah, someone came back and told us that the side of our house was burned and I think, I don't know how long after that someone told us that it's been bombed, so there was nothing but one wall, or one side of the house that was up, everything else was cut, shredded to rubble.

KH: Wow.

SH: Yep, yep.



KH: And that was a house that you had- so you hadn't even lived in it yet?

SH: Mhmm. We have um-

KH: Are you okay?

SH: [coughs] The process of um people making houses in Bosnia is they, they build it but they do the walls and the inside level by level. So we lived in the first level as the second level was being worked on.

KH: Okay.

SH: So we just had like the inside, I don't think even the facade or like the outside was done, it was just blocks. [coughs]

KH: Um, so you, you also talked about, I mean so you were in, if I just make sure I have the timeline straight.

SH: Mhmm.

KH: You're born in '86? '85? Okay. Um, then you were in Srebrenica [corrects pronunciation] um from '93-'95?

SH: Mhmm.

KH: And then you were in Bowling Green in '98, so what- from '95-'98 was that when you were moving around and- ?

[00:20:03]

SH: Well we actually moved, not counting the camps we moved twice. Real big movement, because when we actually [coughs] when we got off the trucks, we were at that school, thrown into a different school, then we spent a couple of days in the fields, and then we got to the house in um around Tuzla.

KH: And that house, that was the Serbian house-

SH: Mhmm.

KH: -that your father found for you guys to live in?

SH: Mhmm, mhmm.

KH: So I don't think you mentioned the camps last time. Can you tell me about that?

SH: Um, that was, and I'm trying to figure out if I can, if I remember even the timeline of how it is, but I know that I want to say we spent two days, it was like a real quick camp, I think it was a big soccer stadium, like football stadium, and people were just like mass of refugees. Just, you know, you have a little blanket and you're sitting there, and that's it. And you have more blankets at night to cover, and that's it, and um sometimes there'd be like aid with like food and drinks, you grab some of that and that's it. [coughs] And you like ask around, "Does anybody know anybody?" You know, "Do you- where's your family?" If you can get like, you know, your uncles and aunts together, you know, then you'll feel a bit safer, you'll, you know, some of the chaos and the panic would diminish a little bit. So yeah, I want to say it was a couple of days that we spent there. and then, you know, the school. I think in one of the schools we actually spent I want to say about four or five days, I would say.

KH: And that was a kind of place for refugees?

SH: [coughs] Mhmm, yeah all this is was a- because you have a mass of refugees coming though.

KH: Yeah.

SH: I mean we're talking about thousands, into smaller towns that can't accommodate. So the only thing was fields, people took some people in but they can only take so much, so they converted schools, big buildings, whatever just to house them as much as they could.

KH: What do you remember about staying in the field?

SH: Uh, it was, it was cold in the mornings and at night. [laughs] It really was. [coughs] Even in like summer time in Bosnia nights are kind of cold, they can get kind of cold, especially the frost.

KH: Hmm.

SH: Um, and I just remember eating like the baby food cookies [slight laugh] that was, that's like war-time food, and I remember people like passing them out. I don't know if they- it was UN or if it was just like Bosnian organized humanitarian groups. They were like walking around and giving people, because you can get some bread but not a lot, so and these are easily pre-packaged and they won't go bad quick, so you just pass it around, and that's what you had, and you know, some water. So I remember eating that.

KH: What did they taste like?

SH: No taste. [both laugh] Depends on which kind you got. There were some that were really good, like a name brand, but there were some that weren't so good, and then some that were stall, and you just, you're like, "Well, but it's food." It's better than nothing, so-

KH: Yeah.

SH: -you took what you could and you thank God and the person that was giving it to you, and that was pretty much it. Then you kind of hoped and wished that someday you can repay them or just repay the world in general for, for the good that kind of came your way, so, yeah.

KH: I re- that's- I remember you saying your mother talking about how she felt like you, you had somehow been lucky even despite all these hardships that you had-

SH: Despite all of that-

KH: -had.

SH: -people had it a lot worse, yes.

KH: Uh huh.

SH: People had, I mean I would just get chills and goosebumps just listening to some other people's stories about everything that they had gone through. It's just amazing that a person can endure so much, and still remain sane. [slight laugh] I mean, it, it, it's amazing, it really is. And one other thing that I remember is uh Army blankets. I don't know if you've ever seen those, but those are treacherous. You hate them because they are so rough and itchy and everything, but then have to because it's so cold. I remember those, a lot.

KH: So you had, you had those in the camps and then at the old school?

SH: Mhmm, mhmm, mhmm. Yeah, because I don't know if they're just easy to get or if that was part of the aid that would've made it into Srebrenica. I'm not really sure how those came about, but I remember them. [laughs, coughs]

[00:25:12]

KH: How's your throat? Do, do you need to take a break or?

SH: Hmm, I think we're okay.

KH: Okay.

SH: A little bit longer.

KH: Okay. [slight laugh]

SH: Mhmm.

KH: Um, well why don't you tell me about how you ended up in Kentucky. I mean how did you- what was your journey to- from those- so the, the last place you talked about living in Bosnia was that Serbian house.

SH: Well, not- we moved after that.

KH: Okay.

SH: Remember I move- we moved twice. So the Serbian house was, I was in maybe for a year or so.

KH: Okay.

SH: And then the rest of the time we actually lived, and I don't know if this was a Serbian house or not, but we got another house that was vacant that we lived in.

KH: Okay.

SH: [Coughs] And this was in a town called uh [00:25:58 town name unclear]

KH: Okay.

SH: Um, so we were all going to school and I think, I guess there was like a huge program, either from the states or from the west in general to take in some refugees from Bosnia. And uh, my father, seeing that there's really not much there for us, he's got five kids, we were going to school and not having enough money to pay for food, having to walk kilometers to school, being little girls it was just tough. So [coughs] he was looking for alternatives, ways to, you know, provide a better life for us, a more normal life. And um, he applied and I think when he went to apply, and I don't know how this all worked, I really- actually I didn't even know that we had applied [laughs] until it was kind of time to go. But I guess they asked him where he wanted to go and he said, "America," I don't know why, he chose America, and uh the program would take us into Croatia for three months, while we were waiting for our flight. [coughs] And so we spent three months in Croatia and we stayed in a, like a big storage unit dumpster like thing, yes. Actually, first, when we first came in, we came into this collective house [slight laugh] that was infested with roaches, yes, and we lived there for I think maybe a month or a little bit more. My mother couldn't take it anymore and I think she went to the authorities, whoever they were, and then she's like, "I have five kids, [coughs] a family of seven, you need to get me out of here." And so they gave us that dumpster, which is a lot better than living where we were.

So yeah, and I mean it, it's aluminum, just imagine what it was like during the day, yeah. So we were there until we got our flight information, and again, this whole time we didn't know where we were going to, and when we got the flight we're going to Nashville. That doesn't mean anything to us, I don't know [coughs] and then you're, and destination is Bowling Green, Kentucky, and you're like, "Okay, well...you know, in God we trust, and let's just go." And that's pretty much it, like essentially that is it. And in that camp we would ask people, you know, "Where are you going? How far is that? Do you know like will we be close? Can we stay in touch?" Blah, blah, blah. [coughs] I mean, if, if I had to do it again I don't think I could survive. Just the mental stress and pressure, uncertainty, un- not knowing what's waiting, I don't know. But I guess we still underestimate ourselves and our ability to endure and, and take, and our strength.

KH: Hmm.

SH: Yeah. [coughs] I am so sorry.

KH: Oh no, do you need to run, take a break and get some more water?

SH: Yeah-

KH: Okay.

SH: -I will for a second.

[End track - 00:29:30]