

11-3-2015

Interview with Amer Salihovic (FA 1137)

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Recommended Citation

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https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fa_oral_hist/270

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Project name: Bosnia Project
Field ID and name: KFP2015IYB_0004_VSsr0001
Interviewee: Amer Salahovich
Interviewer/Recordist: Virginia Siegel
Date: November 3, 2015
Location: The Pioneer Log Cabin, Bowling Green, KY
Others Present: n/a
Equipment used: Marantz recorder
Microphone:
Recording Format: WAV file
Recorded Tracks in Session: 1
Duration: [00:33:00]
Keywords:
Corresponding Materials:
Context:
Technical Considerations:
Transcription prepared by: Kaitlyn Berle

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: Uh, this is Virginia Siegel. I'm here with Amer Salahovich, um, this November 3rd, 2015.

Uh, we are in the Pioneer Log Cabin on WKU's campus here in Bowling Green, Kentucky. And so, uh, last time we talked you, you know, introduced yourself and your family. Uh, I'm not really sure where to start from here but maybe do you, do you want to start about when you left Bosnia, and your story of coming here? Or, where- wherever you'd like to start.

AS: Okay. Um, so I [microphone sound] left Bosnia in 2001, after we got our um- after we decided to move to the United States. So our two options were New Zealand or the United States of America, we both kind of had a lo- uh, we, we, we, in both countries we had um, family, so um, for, for certain reasons um, I guess since we had closer relatives

here in the states, um, or people that we knew better, we uh, opted to come to the United States of America. Um, we left, it was the summer time and we had like a huge going away party, and um, we actually uh, I, I, I had to leave, I wasn't really aware of where I was going or what was going on. Um, I remember my mom was very emotional about uh about it, and my, rest of my family, but I was, um, just a young kid, and um, I guess it was m- more exciting for me, um, traveling for the first time and what not, uh and getting to see the outside world, and um, but it was an emotional moment for our family. We actually, one of my sisters got married before, um, we moved here, so she stayed behind in the, uh, in Bosnia, and she still lives there to this day. So, I didn't rea- it really didn't hit me until a few months, uh, a- after living in the states, but even like the process of coming here, we actually had to go to Croatia, so we were, um, we, we uh couldn't immigrate from Bosnia, we, we, we, we uh, since we, we didn't have a U.S. Embassy or something, um, we had to go through Croatia, and um, so we flew out of uh Zagreb, um, in July, June or July, it's one of those months. And um, we came to New York City, I think that, that was my first uh experience, uh, I think it was um JFK, where we-

VS: Mhm.

AS: -landed. So that was my first uh experience of the, the grand American uh, uh life, culture, and um all the great things, um, so just seeing the big city. Uh, I think we had to go from the, the, the big airport, what was JFK, and go the, the, the smaller one, and I think it's called LaGuardia, and um, yeah that was an experience. It was like the longest ride ever because New York is so big, where just the airport area is like so much traffic and just going from one airport to the other, it just uh seemed like it took forever but man, everything just seemed super big at that time, everything was huge. Um, because, I, I, I, I vaguely remember like European airports but for some reason JFK was just like humongous. Even when we landed it was like you see all these cool airplanes everywhere, uh, especially like the United um- I always remember the United airplanes because they had the um, the, the really nice um silver, silver scheme, and I thought that was just the coolest thing ever. Um, but yeah, we got stuck in New York for a while, we weren't really sure what, what we were do- I, I, like to me, I never asked my dad like if he knew what he was actually doing, but um, it seemed like we were stuck there for a while. Um, then we finally landed in um, in Nashville. Uh, it was night, probably around 10:00 pm, our flight landed in Nashville, and um, our relatives were there to pick us up, and man, just, just seeing a big city for the first time in your life. I mean I don't even see- get to see New York City, like downtown, but when I was going through Nashville I was so amazed just by all the lights, and I remember seeing the Batman tower for the first- or I think it's so, it's so called the Batman tower. The Batman tower for the first time, and it was just like the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, so. And, it was my first time riding in a upscale car I guess, which was a Honda Accord. [slight laughter] And it was a '95 Honda Accord, and this was in 2001, and it was probably like, "Whoa." It was like the greatest experience. And, I, I didn't know the difference between, um, the metric and uh

just looking at the speedometer and stuff, and I was like, "This has to be the fastest car in the world, and stuff," [slight laughter] but it was just like [slight laughter] a regular Honda Accord sedan, and so that was kind of um, it was funny.[00:05:10] And then I know I fell asleep, I remember waking up the next morning, uh, we were um, we were living in my, at, at my cousin's uh residence, uh here in Bowling Green for a few weeks until we got a place of our own, an apartment of our own. Man, it was just like, you go outside every morning and just like, everything is different, everything is clean, everything is polished, you know? And you're just, "Wow, this is really amazing," you know? You have everything, TVs, video games, all this cool stuff, and, and just, just stuff that you're not used to, and you see all these nice cars, and just the abundance of everything is- every- everything is green. The grass is green, the, the grass is always mowed, so um, they had a re- um, my cousin had a bike, so every morning, every time I wake up I would just get on that bike and start ri- riding around, um, the little neighborhood, and it was just a great experience. And then when, when we started living on our own, um, we moved, um, I don't know wh- wh- what- it's by Lampkin Park, that there, there was some uh apartments there, and, and we moved there. And um, I guess that was my first full exposure to uh Ameri- American diversity, um, just the amount of um different uh cultures, backgrounds, uh in America. Um, first time uh I met an African American was, was um, when we moved to the, to that complex. And um, I wasn't really aware of any of the stereotypes or what was actually going on in America. So probably for the first three or four years of my life, I was um, not aware of um some of the, the, just the history, the racism, uh, e- e- even modern day stuff, so I just saw them as equals, you know? Yeah they're a little different, but it was, uh, it was kids I hung out with, I played with them, you know? Um, and yeah just the neighborhood, um, we would always, um, we were always hanging out. And then uh, a month afterwards, I, I enrolled, uh, I was enrolled into Dishman-McGinnis Elementary School. Uh, I started second grade, I finished my first grade in Bosnia, started second, second grade here in the United States. And um, man, the first day of class was like, it was a mix of emotion. I wasn't really terrified, I really didn't feel uncomfortable being in the, in the place, you know? It was just like those initial jitters-

VS: Mhmm.

AS: -but that got like [snapping sound], I mean it just went away really quickly. Um, I remember I only had one other Bosnian classmate, um, I forgot the, uh, the guy's name, but uh, I don't, I don't think he lives here in Bowling Green anymore. Um, but I had him and I kind of stuck with him for the first few days. But man, like even on the first day, like the teacher, so uh, we, we were doing uh class reading, so um, the teacher was just like, "Okay Amer," or wh- however she butchered my name, [slight laugh] and I, I don't remember, but I th- I think she was really, I, I think she was the one who started the whole "Amer," you know? In my county it's called "Ahmed," but um-

VS: Oh really?

AS: Yeah, so it, so it's a little different, you know, pronunciation, but like the reason I call myself Amer was because of that, um, my, my first, uh, my second grade teacher, she would always call me, "*Ameer*" because of that e, so it's like, "Um Ear"-

VS: Mhmm.

AS: -and um, so that was interesting, you know, first day of class she made read in front of everyone. And I was just this kid, I was like a month in, not even a month, maybe like three weeks living in the United States, and she's like, "Read." I'm just like, I knew how to read Bosnian, [slight laugh] and I knew what are the letters, all the letters. I mean the Ws were, and the Ys were kind of like, "Oh, whatever, I don't know what that is," but I was like, "Okay." So I just started reading in my Bosnian form, uh, uh way, and it was just like, uh we just read it as it is, as it is written, so it's like, "B" it's like, "Beh," uh and, you know, eventually I, I, I got a hang of things, and I'm pretty sure I was, uh, proficient in the English language within two, two or three months, and uh enrolling in school. Um, I was really good at math, and um, and that, that, that automatically caught up. I thought I was always the first one done with all the, the problems and stuff, and she was, she was really surprised, and I was like, "Yeah, okay, that's good." And um, I, I did get in trouble a lot for being silly, and I never understood why I got in trouble for being silly, [00:10:18] like, "What is silly?" You know, "like what am I doing that is so bad?" So just like basic things as uh just talking in class and everything, uh I would always get in trouble for that. But I th- I think overall I was a good student, it was just that, that little portion of my um, or that bad habit that I never got to fully kill. And I always enjoyed recess too, I loved recess, so that, that was probably something I really enjoyed in elementary school. Um, but, um, so back- so education went really well for me, um, so I wasn't held back or anything, I just ki- kinda grasped everything really quickly and everything, um, um, all, all the pieces of the puzzle just kind of got put together really smoothly, and all the transition was A-OK. Um, when it comes to family life, um, my sisters were doing their thing, everyone started working, my one, my younger sister, or the next youngest, uh, she's nine years older than me, she was also enrolled in high school, so she went to Bowling Green High School. Uh, she was doing fine, uh, she picked up on the language uh probably at the same rate as I did. Um, everyone else was kind of slower at it. My parents, or my dad, um, being as st- stubborn as he is, really never- he had a whole different philosophy on, or a whole different outlook on life and how he wanted to live, so he just kept to himself. He- h- h- h- h- he didn't find it a good use of time to actually, um, learn the English language, and um, sometimes his excuse is like I'm too old and whatnot, but I never thought that was a good excuse, for anybody, uh, anyone, um, especially when you don't put in effort, or as much an effort as I think you should put in. Um, so most of my childhood was spent, um, especially after like three or four months, at the age of like seven, eight, probably starting at eight or nine, I started doing like heavy translating, and my expectat- like the expectations of my parents, and it was just it- it wasn't just my parents, I would have to go take other people that were

linguistically disabled um to places, you know fill out these [slight laugh] tremendous paperwork for them, and um, and I'm just like, "I don't know what this is," but um name, date, you know, all this information. And um, just by trial and error, you know? And asking them what, what are- what like, what they know or what I should put in for certain ac- uh things, and I was just learning how. I was always like to go-to kid to take people and translate for them, even at such a young age, and it's like who expects an eight year-old to go do adult work ever? So that was majority of my, my life, even up, all the way up to high school it was always um taking, taking people places, you know? Whether it be uh to government um, um, places, or um lawyers, or um banks, um, just pretty much anywhere, whoever needed, and especially my parents, you know?

VS: Mhm.

AS: My dad had like really high expectations of me, which were in, in some ways, um, really unrealistic. Um, but you know, it, it was kind of difficult for me, to be honest, but I somehow managed. And um, now that I look back at it, I'm really thankful for those opportunities because um it matmur- matured me a way that probably other kids didn't have the opportunity, even though it was a little stressful, you know? You um, you learned how to deal with certain people, you learned the in and ou- in, in and outs of, you know, how do you get uh go from point A to point B, or where do you go for these certain or so? I guess it was um, the main benefit was just knowledge. [coughs] And um, just understanding, uh, getting familiar with people, getting to know people, communicating, networking, all those great stuff. Um, but yeah so, um, I guess um, then uh after a year, uh living at our first uh place of residence, then we moved to a more concentrated uh Bosnian, um, I'm gonna say just a region, um, I don't call it a neighborhood, but it, it's technically is a neighborhood, it's Stonehenge. [00:15:10] Um, so it's just like a lot of apartments, even today, a lot of immi- immigrants live there, and Bosnians are nowhere to be found there anymore, but that was one of our locations. So I think a lot Im- Immigrants, or when we have an influx of immigrants into the city, they usually go through that area of- called Stonehenge, and um, and that's where I lived. Um, and I, I think that area is where I, I got exposed to, um, the bad- I, I can say- I, I now, now when I look back at it, I consider it a really bad neighborhood, a lot of bad influences, um, especially for youth, um, within the Bosnian community itself, and then the other, um, the other people that, that you were surrounded by. So um, most of these people weren't educated, or um, the way they functioned or the way they lived life wasn't really a good example for uh young kids, as such, such as us and um, but um, I think the people that kind of kept me at bay was my mother. Um, she would always, um, she, she was always watching where I was going, you know? She would, she would actually come look for me, you know? Uh most parents did not do that, you know? They, they just let their children do whatever, you know? Which, in some cases, um, kind of fired back. Um, but my mother always got- was always strict on me, and um, she, she always watched where I was going, she always lectured me and all, all this crazy stuff on how I

should behave or who I should be friends with, who I shouldn't be, um, watching my back and all this stuff because I think she was actually aware of where I was living, and I wasn't kind of fully aware of that. So she kind of, um, she kind of, I don't know what the word for it, uh word for it is, but um, she, she, she cushioned me or I, I don't, I don't even know how to-

VS: Sheltered you?

AS: Sheltered me, yeah there we go, that's- kind of lost for words today, but uh, she sheltered me, in, in a lot of ways, and um, I'm forever, forever thankful for that because that kind of kept me within bounds that um society, if, if, if I, if I just stuck to the flow of things, I, I don't think that I would be the person that I am today. I don't think I'd be talking with you today, and um, I think that goes for all, for all people, especially um from my county, um, for most successful people, educated people, it's those people with really strong parents and um, and just um, people that kind of figured things out on their own, um, they learned from their lessons, you know? Some people never even learn from their own lessons. And um, and probably even the ability to learn from other people's' mistakes, and just know to say, "That's wrong, don't do it," you know? So, um, there's a few that, that are capable of- were capable of doing that, then there's a few that weren't. And um, but um, regardless, um, so uh, there's that one transition, but even during that, at that time I think something really good to point out uh when it comes to the Bosnian community is um, we, we are Muslims, and um during the war, I mean that, that, that, that was the, the main uh, the main reason for the ethnic cleansing, you know, during the Balkan Wars, and uh, from '92 to '96, um, was the fact of um- uh was, was based on, on the idea that all, all the Muslims had to be cleansed out of that uh that land to created this grand Serbia, or whatever they wanted. Um, [coughs] so what we tried to preserve, um, of course our heritage, um, um, we, we really didn't like the idea, uh or I shouldn't say didn't like the idea, but um we had our different opinion on, on the, the whole idea of the American melting pot, you know? This country was uh founded, founded, uh, on the principles of freedom, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, freedom of thought, freedom of pretty much whatever, you know? Um, so you had the, the choice to be what you wanted to be, the freedom of individualism, and um, we took that concept to heart, you know? [00:20:05] Um so, we try to preserve our heritage, our language, our culture, our religion, um, and religion played a huge factor in everyday life. Um, so we would have uh, we had a masjid on a- so it wasn't a, a mosque, you know? You can't classify something as a mosque if it isn't I, I guess it was to be a- I don't know, there, there's certain uh-

VS: Hmm.

AS: -classifications for a mosque, or what can be called a mosque, but this was uh, it was called a masjid or a place uh where people can uh gather, and where it used to be was on um, Old Morgantown Road, um, it was down by su- toward the end, toward the fire station end. Uh that's where all, all the Muslims, or all the Bosnian Muslims would gather, and it

was actually started by one of my cousins, um, who, who saw it as a need for the community, you know? Um, and he, he was the first, um, first leader, he, he, he led the prayers and whatnot, since he was most, um, I wouldn't say educated, but um, he never had formal education on Islam, but like just from books and what he actually knew, he, he was capable of leading prayers and whatnot. So um, then we got our first actual Imam, um, someone with an education, uh, that was certified to preach, and um, um, and, and be a Imam. Uh so, he had a degree and, and uh, his name was [unclear], and um, he was my first, um, Islamic teacher. And basically in Islamic school it's um, so it's Saturday-Sunday school, so you had your uh regular Monday through Friday school, um, and then you had your Islamic school on Saturday and Sunday, and uh that consumed my life, all the way, all the way up to the age of uh fifteen or sixteen. Um, but it was real- a really good period, um, I, I, I enjoyed, um, the weekends because you would go there for like an hour or two, um, you- yes, you would have to learn, you know, you would have to recite and all, all, all this good stuff, you know, learn about morals, what to do, what not to do, how to pray and all this um, um, just the re- religious fundamentals, and then um, but then you, you would also get to interact with people, you know, people that you knew, people that spoke your own language. So it was kind of, you know, um, being grouped with people you can, um, you can talk to, and um, it, it- I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it a lot. Um, but yeah, that, that, that was uh, uh I think something that, that, that should be noted, um, and uh, our Islamic community, as more Bosnians started to come in, our um, our community expanded, uh we actually in [train whistle] 2005, I think, we built a mosque, and you can, you, you can fact check me on that date, I don't think it's actually correct. But we actually built, built a mosque, uh, [train whistle] it was a-

VS: [Here. Keep talking, but we're- okay we're back, sorry, there was a train, but we're back. Go on, sorry.]

AS: So uh, in 2005 we opened up our, um, official mosque uh in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and um, it's on Morgantown Road, uh, by William H. Natcher Parkway. And um, prior to opening up the, or right as a few months after we opened up the mosque, our Imam, uh our Imam left for New York, um, for career purposes I guess, and family reasons, and we got a new Imam, uh, his name was Bilal. Uh, he came along with um his wife, Amala, and uh, uh and a kid, and uh, they moved from Bosnia to the United States on um, on just a visa I guess, I'm, I'm not sure how that whole process goes. But um, but that was the first time we, um, the Muslim community, uh so it wasn't just the Bosnian community, it was the Muslim community together, um so we had, um, Muslims from all, all walks of life, um, um, from Pakistan, Egypt, uh Saudi Arabia, all praying at the same um, same mosque. And um, after a while um, we, we kind of co-existed for, for majority of time, then uh, some tempers um started to flair, and it wasn't really uh racially motivated or anything, it was just more politically motivated. Who held the power, who gave the most money, um, which is a sad, really sad thing in a, in any religion, but um, um, basically it was uh power grabbing. Wh- wh- who deserved to control um what was being, you

know, how the mosque functioned, even though it had nothing to do with um what the Imam was preaching, or who was saying what, you know? [00:25:15] it was a Bosnian Imam, he was um [clears throat] he was all about Bosnia, [slight laughs] he was probably more Bosnian than any of them down there, but um, it was just in, in political turmoil, in a religious institution, which is always not a- never a good thing, um, politics and religion should never mix. But after that point um the Bosnian, the majority of the Bosnian community, uh some still stay down there, but the majority kind of split and formed their own new um Bosnian mosque um, um, when I say Bosnian mosque uh it was just majority Bosnian, it still functioned on the idea that, or it to, to this day since I'm a member of that mosque, um anybody can pray in it so we just call it the Bosnian Islamic Center. Um, but it just, um, yeah we kind of split our, split, split our ways with um the other uh Islamic uh population in Bowling Green. Um-

VS: When was that one created?

AS: Uh two thousand- shoot, 2009, I think. And um when, in 2012 we actually built a really big and beautiful mosque on, on Old S- no, no, no, Blue Mill Road. So it's off of Russellville Road, but um, it's really hard to miss the mosque, it has just like this huge minaret and it's right next to a church so it was kind of um, it's kind of a beautiful thing to see, you know? Co-existence, I guess, um. [slight laugh] But um, but yeah, as far as the, the Muslim community, um, when it comes um to the Bosnians, I think there's, there's been a lot of political turmoil. Um, I don't want to say [snapping noise] uneducated people trying [snapping noise] to do power grabbing but everybody wants their voices to be heard, um, especially the people that, that, that um, come from my region of the- or, or my- our region in Bosnia. Uh, they're just a little different, I guess, and even from our, um, when we separated the first time, the second mosque they built uh was made, um- there was also another internal struggle where, the way I saw it, was just another, you know, power struggle. Who gets to say, you know? Who, who has more say in everything? And um, so they built another mosque, which was funny to some extent, to ob- to observers. You know, it's like, to me it was just like hooligans, it was like grown men acting like kids. E- e- even the first time it happened it was just like grown men acting like kids, you know? Can't find reso- solution to like things that shouldn't even be a problem, you know? So you're creating problems just based on God knows what motivations, and um, well yeah, that, that, that's pretty much ab- the, the everything about the Bosnian community. Um, right now, we're at a point, [sighs] I guess religion was more a bigger part of our life before. Uh, so let's say from 2000, or let, let's just even take it back before I came here, from like '98 all the way up to like 2008, 2009, maybe even 2012, religion was really um a big part of our life. But right now, or in the past like we'll just say eight years, so since 2008, it's been on a decline, and that's just not seen. Been seeing it in our Islamic Center, it's also being seen in um, in the one um, the original Islamic center on um Morgantown Road. And it, it's, it's truly a sad thing to me because, you know, once you forget your re- uh- religion, you know, um- religion is important to me, and it's important to um- I think

it should be important to all Bosnians because, um, to me, the way I see it, um, is they tried to eliminate us, or they, they, they tried to exterminate you based on the fact that you were a Muslim, you know? You were practicing, you were a follower of Islam, and now you're- to me, I see it as just uh, on- on- once you forget your religion, and um, and this is not like forgetting your religion or because of logical reasoning, or because you found a new path or a new way, no, this is just pure laziness, you know? [00:29:59] And um, when you're observing this happening in your community, uh, to me it's sometimes, it's almost as if you're fulfilling the legacy of the Chetniks, or, or, or the aggressors during the, the, the Bosnian conflict. You're just kind of finishing their mi- mission unknowingly, unconsciously you're fin- you're fi- finishing uh a mission that they started, which was to drive um, I guess Islam out of Bosnia, or Bosnians in general, just out of, out of Bosnia. So, it wasn't even- it's, it's a county that, that was, was um to them, not supposed to exist, you know? So, to me, I kind of have um- I don't like what's going on um, because I think um, I believe all, all the way we practice Islam, uh especially in Bosnia, w- we- we've always been a society which, with many religions, and um, many different types of people. We were like the melting pot of Europe, so we were the America of Europe, you know? Whoever wasn't expected was like in Bosnia, so the Muslims, then you have the Orthodox, then you have some Catholics, and everybody co-existed, you know?

VS: Hmm.

AS: Until politic-political um [background noise] empires-

VS: Squirrels.

AS: Yeah. [slight laugh] -polit- uh, uh political um motivations, or um, political reasons, kind of um brought tensions between people, but um, it was always peaceful, you know? People practiced their religion, and um, I just kind of hate to see it going away from that, because people are now chasing money, you know? People are, um, doing things that are jeopardizing their marriages, their children, their- just, the- their, and even their own personal lives, you know? Wh- which uh in some sense I believe can, can be um, could be eliminated or it could be avoided just by, you know, just by having some self control and not being lazy, and um, even just like prayer, you know? Um, it, it keeps you in check somehow, to, to some extent. But um, yeah we're- we've definitely been on a decline I'd say, Muslim um community, uh the Bosnian Muslim, um, when it comes to practicing the religion, I guess. Um, so that, that, that's something that um, that I've noticed, um. [sighs] But yeah, um-

VS: We, we are at thirty minutes, so if you have anything you want to add we can-

AS: Yeah, I, I think it's probably best to like just start over-

VS: Okay.

AS: -another time.

VS: Okay-doke. All right.

[00:33:00 end recording]

