

Accession No.: JP-02-04-C

Date(s) June 13, 2002

Fieldworker(s): Jessica Payne

Interviewee(s): Azir Begovic, Bosnian folk dancer, refugee & immigrant coordinator

Place of Recording: Interviewee's home, Holyoke, MA.

Recording Equipment: Marantz PMD222 Microphone(s): Shure VP64

Recorded in: mono: X stereo:

Tape Brand and Format: Cassette Maxell UDII 110

Amount Tape Used: Cassette: Side A: 55 minutes Side B: 30 minutes

**Brief summary of tape contents:** Studies in folk dance and music and involvement in a folk group; teaching dance in Bosnia and the US; regional dance traditions in former Yugoslavia and since the war; impact of the war on culture and folk dance; wedding customs; importance of preserving cultural history through folk groups and schools; efforts to teach young Bosnians and generate discussion and involvement in folk dance traditions; importance of saving traditions before they're lost.

**Counter    Contents**  
**no./ABS**

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| 00  | <b>Introduction.</b>  |
| 10  | <b>Personal history.</b> Born in Sarajevo where he grew up, attended high school and went to college; worked for federally-run railroad company as a dispatcher; lived in the Bosnian city of Bihac for 4.5 years and worked as a dispatcher before returning to Sarajevo where he worked in the accounts office of the railroad company.   |
| 45  | <b>Involvement in folk dance.</b> In the 80s started folk dancing. Studied classical and Latin dance in high school and acrobatic rock and roll (couples dancing to rock music; involves lots of movement with the men throwing the women in the air) for a few years before doing folk dancing.  |
| 70  | <b>Family background.</b> Father began working for the railroad in his 20s then in railroad laboratory as a coil inspector; later worked in railroad administrative offices. Mother was a rug maker with her older sister in Sarajevo. She was born in Visegrad in the western part of Bosnia; father was born in a small village (Sjeverin) in the eastern part of Bosnia; they moved to Sarajevo after being married. |
| 105 | <b>Folk dance in the family.</b> Mother did (taught/performed?) folk dancing for 5-6 years in elementary school then her husband didn't allow her to continue. Father loved music and dance but was never in a folk group. In Bosnian culture people learn from each other; there are steps and movements that are passed on from generation to generation, don't have known roots.                                     |

- 125 **Dance in the culture.** People dance all the time, for special occasions, weddings, circumcisions, harvest at the end of the summer, birth, any occasion is time for a party; there is no word for "party" in Bosnian, its called *sijelo*. After harvesting corn chips people make a party, visit, talk, and sing; this is part of the culture. In the 50s and 60s there was no TV; people didn't get TV for a while; had radios; people got together; lots of people in the rural villages didn't have electricity until a while after W.W.II; gatherings were a way to get together.
- 170 **Folk dancing before the war.** Was involved in folk dancing for the 10 years before the war; went to folk dancing school; studied music, costumes, singing, choreography, steps. Before the war studied and performed dances from all parts of the former Yugoslavia. Was in a folk group called *Saobracajac*; had twelve different "choreographies" with appropriate costumes from throughout Yugoslavia, enough material for a three hour performance. There were lots of folk dance groups; they would be called to perform for holidays; lots of groups traveled throughout the world representing one of Europe's richest areas for folk dance and culture. Learned a great deal.
- 215 **Folk dancing since the war.** Now the country is split up and the borders are closed; in Bosnia they only do Bosnian dances instead of also doing dances from Serbia, Croatia, Masadonia. Folk dance and music doesn't have anything to do with war, but people won't do the dances of their enemies; culture and music is being killed because of the war.
- 230 **War.** Knew the war was going to happen and escaped 5-6 months before it started; quit his job, left everything behind and came to the US to start a new life; started with nothing; was hard, but he survived. War has effected people differently; some have culture shock, economic shock. Former Yugoslavia had public transportation and you didn't need a car; here you need a car for everything. You didn't need to call someone to make a plan for dinner, you just went to their home; here you have to call ahead, plan ahead; that didn't exist in Bosnia. For people in their 50s, 60s its a big shock; don't have places to go visit; sit at home, are isolated, unhappy; different for young people.
- 295 **Family.** Father died in 1973; mother died in 1993 in Florida in a car accident; has a sister in Hadley, MA; step-brother and step-sister-in-law live in Southampton, MA; they gave him everything he needed when he first came; has a younger brother who lives in Westfield, MA; his step-brother and his wife helped him a lot; she is American.
- 320 **How got involved in dance.** Liked different kinds of music--classical, jazz; started taking classes in classical and Latin dance, tango. Took a break and was looking for something to do with his free time; younger sister was in a folk group and asked him to try it; started with the group and got more involved. Was lured in by the costumes; they have to be taken care of, are rare, 70-100 years old; especially rare today; even in 80s they needed to be taken care of; got into the

costumes and their history and how they relate to the dances in different parts of the country; was interested in the choreography, the history of the events depicted in the dances and decided to learn more. Found out about an international folk dance school in Croatia and went for 5 years studying costumes, singing, steps, choreography; hasn't forgotten any of it; met friends with whom he is still in contact; "music is something that you don't make enemies with."

- 385 **Studies at the folk school.** Studied six different dance zones in Yugoslavia, 1-2 per year. School consisted of 2 weeks in the winter and 3-4 weeks in the summer; started dancing at 7am-1pm. Studied steps and movements, ways to write movements down, musical notes and kinethography. Kinethography is a dance alphabet that he never learned; not words, but marks for the body, how to put the leg up, location of the hands, legs, head. In afternoons studied costumes, their history, songs and where they came from, history of dances and choreographies, the story behind it all. When you present these dances to a folk group (say to teach people in his group) you have to know everything behind it; the dancers can do it but they need to know everything about it to do it well; a good choreographer knows everything about each dance. "Its not enough to just dance, you have to add spice and sugar to make it smooth and nice." Hundreds of people attended the folk dance school to learn about this.
- 445 **Dance zones and studies.** Alpine (north in the Alps), Adriatic (southern strip of coast and islands), Moravian and Verdarian (both along central rivers of these names), Dinarian (north of Adriatic strip along the mountains of this name) and Panonian (flat central valley). Zones correspond with regions with similar dance customs, different instrumental accompaniment. Had a professor who is an ethno-choreographer who taught about songs, steps, choreography of each zone; some zones dance in circle, half circle or line. Was great to study this; over five years met at least 100 people from outside of Yugoslavia there to study; well-known school and teachers; school still exists but only study Croatian dance; now called a seminar not an institute. There is also a school in Bosnia but only study Bosnian dance; this is what is killing the culture because steps, costumes, dances are together and there are similarities throughout the Balkans.
- 485 **Folk group Saobracajac.** Applied all his knowledge to folk group; taught kids, teens, and adults in Sarajevo; had 3 children's groups with assistants teaching basic steps so that they could move on to the adult group, establish a base of interest; in Bosnia there was lots of interest in this; kids like to dance and sing. Loved traveling with the group; spent 10-11 years traveling all over Europe with the group and on his own; only countries he didn't go to were Norway, Finland and England. Folk groups like his are amateur level, they don't get paid for dancing but their expenses are covered; this is different from the US where people are paid for everything; young kids liked it because it was an opportunity to travel.

- 520 **Repertoire.** Songs for all different occasions; lyrics are hundreds of years old; no known authors for this music; *sevdalinke* are love songs, tell stories about couples, who's cheating, who likes who; there are all kinds of reasons to make a song; sad songs; most are pretty easy to sing and to listen to. Its hard to dance and sing at the same time; every dancer hates this; you have to know techniques for breathing, singing, and dancing; you get tired. Songs and dances usually tell a story; wedding songs are cheerful, happy, well wishing to the couple; these songs are fast; not many songs for death because Muslims don't sing when someone dies; Russian Orthodox people in Serbia have some songs for death but there is not music for death.
- 575 **Detailed description of wedding customs.** Weddings lasted 7 days; groom's father asks for the bride's hand; when accepted groom's father goes to bride's village to get her and bring her to her new village; there are celebrations along the way; bride's village and bride are sad because of her departure; groom's family and village are happy; people drink *sljivovica* or *rakija* (schnapps); in Bosnia weddings happen in days after proposal, unlike in the States where it could be a year or so later; there is an ongoing exchange of gifts between all involved throughout the celebrations; groom's father hires 1-3 musicians to play all day for the wedding; different customs in which groom or bride goes around with an apple or a plate for people to give coins and money as gifts; sometimes bride serves the food and each person pays her. There are dances depicting weddings and other special occasions but show it differently; condense the wedding ceremony; there's a wedding dance from Basanska Posavina in the northeast of Bosnia that is only 12 minutes long; most dances take a small piece of something. Wedding traditions are important because these customs are disappearing among younger generations; disappearing in the cities and even in villages; people have left, disappeared, or been killed. The culture will suffer from the war for the next 50-60 years; these customs will be lost because of the war; will kill the culture, music and history; nobody is writing it down or recording it.
- 725 **Conversations with elders about customs.** In the US started to collect information from elders about their customs; people told him that women, kids and men would all be in separate rooms; the women would start singing, then the men would sing and then they would sing back and forth.

**Side B**

- 00 **Dance customs.** Asked people about the kinds of things they'd done. One woman told him they sang on a plate; this meant that women would gather around a *sinija* (table) with a metal *tepsija* (baking pan) on it and they'd sing together and the pan would amplify their voices; in 1985 was in a village and heard four young women singing on a plate and heard this sound; you can't describe it; that's how they made music; accompanied with different instruments. In some parts of Bosnia when women finished their song the men would start singing and they would have a competition back and forth. In villages there would be 2-4 men and women whose voices matched to form a melody; they

usually knew each other for years and if one person left the group would never sing again because they couldn't replicate the sound. This is how people enjoyed themselves; accompanied by *frula* (flute) and *sargija* (3-4 stringed instrument like a mandolin).

- 130 **Singing lessons.** In folk group had singing lessons; ethnomusicologist Dunja Rihtman Sotric, directed museum in Sarajevo; she was in love with singing; is in Israel now; she was his professor; each dancer had to do singing lessons.
- 150 **Auditions and teaching.** Members of the folk group could audition each year to go into a higher group; the A group performed for the public and the B group was a back up; taught two A groups and two B groups to prepare them for auditions; also had three children's groups. One year he had 140 kids in his beginner group starting at age 7; you have to put yourself on their level to have fun with them and teach them; played with them but made them learn; had an assistant who acted like an adult and told him that wouldn't work, you have to be like a kid to teach them. His group had 26 pairs, 52 people; half knew every single choreography; its good to have that many; they are amateurs and you need a back up.
- 220 **Musicians in group.** Had an orchestra including accordion, violin, clarinet, flute, contra bass and guitar. Sometimes used a string orchestra with *tamburica*, a small stringed guitar all the way to the contra bass, no violin or cello or *violin cello* (cello), all plucked stringed instruments; had a few conductors; we'd practice the steps and then put it all together.
- 260 **Group in Philadelphia.** There is a folk group in Philadelphia at a school there--can't remember the name--with all straight-A students; has seen them a few times in CT; they are similar to the group he was in.
- 270 **Teaching in the US.** Tried to organize a folk group but was unsuccessful; had a group with 6 girls and 2 boys of different ages; started out good and taught them a lot and then they stopped suddenly, only 2 girls left; you need more than that to teach. Taught master classes at Hampshire College, Greenfield Community College, Mt. Holyoke; 24 students at Hampshire, all Americans.
- 300 **Bosnians in western MA.** Not many Bosnians in western MA, only 300; with high pace of living don't have time to dance; understands this; when he first came he didn't have time for dance either, not until later.
- 310 **Teaching Americans.** He was referred to Daphne Lowell, dance instructor at Hampshire College; she invited him to a Five-College meeting to present and then to teach; all American students; surprised at number of students and how they were able to learn the dances and to sing the songs in Croatian; has a video of them; shows that Americans can learn this material.

- 330 **Declined to sing a song for the interview.**
- 335 **Discussion about photograph of his parents in costumes.** Taken May 1958 when mother was pregnant with him; wearing Bosnian costumes that show a strong Turkish influence; people still use same type of costume; parents wanted to record a piece of history; a photographer who did these pictures.
- 375 **Influence of religious differences in dances.** Differences are part of the history; not prejudiced against different types of dance; learned all dances before the war; before it didn't matter what religion you were.
- 400 **JP: distinction between original dances and staged presentations.**
- 410 **Role of folk groups in preserving history.** Archive of choreography and music; there is no written record of all of this; even though there are lots of books about it; folk groups are collecting and keeping the music and culture and history alive, what people did 50-60 years ago; this is a different way of showing how it was done; glad we have this because its part of our history that could be forgotten.
- 435 **Sponsorship.** Dance groups were organized by elites not by the government like in the Soviet Union; before there was no money to preserve music; there were a few organizations doing this but didn't do much.
- 440 **Library of books.** Left an entire library of books behind in Bosnia; couldn't bring them; collected books for 10 years; all lost; probably someone used them to build fires; when you're trying to survive you don't care about anything else; now there is no money to preserve culture.
- 455 **Contact with folk dance group in Bosnia.** Still in contact with members of his group; there are dances from Bosnia and people who do them; there are still people who can tell them how dances were done; mainly Muslim but some Orthodox and Catholic; people don't know what is going on outside their own borders; dance and culture has nothing to do with war; dances were created before the war, before W.W.II and W.W.I; no one wrote them down.
- 475 **Tried to organize a symposium.** Wanted to do a seminar/symposium in Europe to get his friends and colleagues together to discuss culture and folk dance and music that is disappearing but didn't have time to make it happen; this needs to happen because everyone is closing their borders and its disappearing; in some parts of the former Yugoslavia dancers start to left and in others to the right; how you hold your hands; whether men and women touch one another while dancing; these details need to be preserved.
- 495 **Hope to teach other Bosnians.** Wants to find young Bosnians to teach what he knows and preserve steps, dances, music; has written steps down, needs to practice but still remembers everything; it will take years to teach all this; its

hard, sweating work; have to practice a lot to achieve something; its not for perfection, can't be perfect; Bulgarian dancers go for perfection; folk dancing is more natural, its not ballet; folk dances come from the people so you do it how you feel it not how some professor of ballet tells you; its not like modern dance either which expresses current moment; folk dances are from a long time ago; use the movement of the feet and expression of the face to show the customs. Wants to form a group to work regularly together to practice and perform in costumes; will be a piece of Bosnian culture not in existence anymore but can show how people danced before.

565 **Thankful that people are interested in preserving this culture.** Hopes there can be funding for this; worth preserving because it will be lost in the future; if he doesn't teach his daughter and others it will be lost.

575 END