

Massachusetts Cultural Council
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

FIELDNOTES

Accession Numbers

JP-02-04-FN JP-02-04-C
fieldnotes audio recordings negatives color slides

Date(s): Meetings: April 2 and June 13, 2002 and several phone conversations

Related Accession Numbers:

Individual: Azir Begovic, Bosnian dancer, singer, teacher, resettlement officer.

Fieldworker(s): Jessica Payne

Location of Interview: Office of Jewish Family Services

Address: [REDACTED]

Phone: Daytime: [REDACTED] Evening: NA Other:

Special Needs: Available to serve as a translator, \$15/hour fee.

Traditions documented (traditional art/skills, occupational experience, ethnic or religious community):
Bosnian folk dance and music traditions; folk dance/music festivals, crafts and wedding traditions in the former Yugoslavia, Bosnian refugee community in Springfield and individuals around the country.

Other Possible Contacts:

Osman. elder (67 years old) cabinet maker
Several Bosnian women who do needlework.

Summary Description: Azir Begovic is a resettlement officer for Jewish Family Services in Springfield, MA where he works with Bosnian and Russian refugees (among other nationalities). He is a folk dancer and singer who spent five years training in a traveling folk school in the former Yugoslavia. He was a member of the folk dance ensemble *Saobracajac* where he also served as an instructor. Since settling in the Pioneer Valley he has taught dance classes in the Five Colleges (at Hampshire, Smith, Mt. Holyoke) but has sensed little interest within his own Bosnian community in preserving the dance customs that he knows. Having worked within the Bosnian community since he arrived in the States in 1991, he knows and is known by many people in the local and national Bosnian community. Currently there are around 250-300 Bosnians in Western Massachusetts and 8,000 in the United States. When I met with him (first for an informal conversation and later for a recorded interview), we discussed traditional cultural practices in the former Yugoslavia and Bosnia and his involvement in folk music and dance.

Both of Azir's parents and his sister were folk dancers and singers. Azir began playing the accordion when he was 10 but stopped after the death of his father when he was 15 (he can still play but needs to practice). He was drawn to dance from an early age and took classes in classical and Latin American dance, including tango, while in high school. At his sister's urging, he joined her folk dance group for several years until in his 20s he decided to go to school to study dance. Beginning in 1984 when he was 26, he attended a "folk school" or "school of folklore" where his studies included folk dance, folk music and folk song, music to accompany dances, dance steps and methods for

describing them in writing (kinathography) and the history of individual dances. The school sessions took place over several weeks in the spring and winter in locations throughout the country.

Azir's studies reflected the tremendous diversity of the former Yugoslavia, home to 27 distinct national groups. [This region is now divided into distinct nations: Bosnia and Hercegovina, Serbia, Macedonia, Slovenia, Montenegro and Croatia; as an indication of changes since the war, Bosnia is now home to only 17 different national groups.] Variation in dance customs corresponded with the country's diverse geographic regions, such that dance scholars and enthusiasts designated five dance "zones." The Alpine zone is in the north along the mountainous Alps, the Moravian and Verdarian zones refer to areas surrounding rivers of these names in the central part of the country, the Adriatic zone covers a strip along the southern coast and its nearby islands, the Dinarian zone is in the Dinar mountains just north of the coast, and the Panonian zone covers a flat central valley. Geographic characteristics of these zones were reflected in dance customs which also varied from village to village, so that each zone contained distinct subzones. Prior to the war when these zones covered a single nation state, scholars, amateur performers and folk dance enthusiasts studied and performed repertoires from all five zones. This is no longer the case due to the intense ethnic tensions that exploded during the war. The folk school Azir attended still exists, but it focuses exclusively on dance customs of Croatia where it is now located. Other schools and ensembles have also continued to function but they too concentrate exclusively on the regional styles tied to newly established national boundaries.

Before leaving his country, Azir was an avid dancer who traveled throughout Europe performing with *Saobracajac* and attending folk dance festivals with friends and colleagues. This came to a halt in the early 90s as ethnic tensions escalated and civil war seemed inevitable. In 1991 he decided to escape to the United States, leaving just five months before the outbreak of the war.

Azir settled in the Springfield, Holyoke area where his step-brother and sister-in-law lived and began working for Lutheran Family Services' immigrant and refugee program, later joining Jewish Family Services. Eventually, he turned his attention again to dancing and set about trying to teach young Bosnians. To his dismay he found parents and children did not have a lasting interest in preserving their national dance customs. The last class he taught to a group of young Bosnians went for about a month and half before the boys and girls in it decided to stop attending. He attributes this lack of sustained involvement to parents who are not concerned about losing their culture and make little effort to pass their customs on to their children. Americans, in contrast, did take an interest. A member of the dance faculty at Hampshire College invited Azir to teach there where he had 26 students. He has taught several courses at Hampshire College as well as at nearby Smith and Mt. Holyoke Colleges. Although he has enjoyed these opportunities, his wish is to teach young Bosnians with the hope of forming a dance group.

Azir continues to be in touch with friends and dance colleagues in the former Yugoslavia, some of whom are still involved in his dance troupe *Saobracajac*. He has friends and family throughout the States who are dance enthusiasts but they are too scattered to dance together consistently. Any dance group would need to consist of 6-8 people since most of the dances are performed in a circle or a line. Along with two

sisters who live in this region, he has a friend in Boston who would be interested in joining a dance group. I have suggested that Azir consider forming a group of adult dancers in order to generate interest within the community and to build a foundation for teaching younger people.

Azir's involvement in folk music and dance is part of a common phenomenon in which elite members of a society attempt to preserve a national cultural legacy by studying and performing, in this case, regional music and dance customs. Unlike the state-sponsored ensembles in countries of the former Soviet Union, in the former Yugoslavia the studied celebration of folk culture evolved among a scholarly and artistic elite independent of the government (this issue should be confirmed further).

Although the dances represent cultural customs deemed to be in decline, if not extinct, the practice of preserving cultural history through staged performance could itself be considered a tradition. These practices and the knowledge associated with them, which Azir possesses, take on heightened cultural currency because of the devastation of the war. For someone like Azir, the preservation of these traditions through training and performance is especially important as a way of maintaining cultural ties for those who have resettled away from their native homes. Azir's wish to work in a sustained way with young Bosnians extends from his concern that they will grow up in America lacking awareness and exposure to rich aspects of their Bosnian heritage. His challenge is to convey the significance and relevance of folk music and dance now that the way of life many these practices represent has been so thoroughly uprooted by the war, the division of the region, and the death and immigration of large numbers of the population.

Additional notes about cultural customs in the former Yugoslavia

(Topics were discussed in informal interview; some also covered in recorded interview; see audio log)

Costumes. Every village had its own costumes which varied according to geographic regions and religious affiliation. In addition to clothing, hair arrangement was a major part of dance costumes. Hundreds of years ago, women used to spend up to six hours arranging their hair before dancing. Villages had their own distinct hair styles and arrangements for specific dances which were accomplished using sugar water in place of today's gels and sprays.

Songs. There are songs for everything -- holidays, lullabies, love songs, songs about heroes, hardships; among Russian Orthodox people there are special funeral songs. There is a special category of love songs--*sevdalinke*. "Bosnian people are open minded, warm, friendly people." Guests are treated specially. If someone new comes to a rural village or to a person's home, everyone in the village gathers to meet that person and to hold a party in their honor; there is singing, dancing, and costumes are displayed. In the cities, its similar with some differences due to Western and other cultural influences. There, a host would call up friends to greet a guest and there would be singing, but not dancing or displays of costumes. Generally, Bosnian people celebrate whenever there is an occasion: birthdays, sending a boy to the army.

Festivals. In the spring and fall throughout the former Yugoslavia and in today's Bosnia and Croatia, there are regional and international dance festivals where folk dance enthusiasts go to watch others and to dance themselves. Azir used to travel every weekend to different festivals to dance with his choreographer friends. Many of the festivals are still going on.

Weddings. Weddings used to last up to seven days depending on location. There are many customs related to how to prepare and hold a wedding. Marriages used to be pre-arranged so there was a whole process of preparing to introduce the bride to the groom's village where she would live. First the groom's family would come to the bride's village and there would be celebrations there, then they would travel to the groom's village and the wedding would take place. Today, marriages are no longer pre-arranged although some religious groups still hold weddings over many days. Young people aren't maintaining wedding customs any longer and are generally geared towards leaving Bosnia.

Books and audio tapes. A recent book has been published with 500 folk songs. Azir's wife Halida (works for CFS) went to Bosnia recently and looked for it but was unable to find it. When Azir came to the States in 1991 he left behind a collection of over 100 books on Bosnian folk culture which he will never be able to get back. Scholars began collecting and publishing books on folk dancing beginning in the 1930s, and there is now a significant body of literature on the topic. When Azir came he brought audio tapes of music used to teach dance which he still has.

During the 1970s and 1980s Bosnian artists tended to be an elite group with training and ties to Western Europe where many lived.

Recommendations for further research and program support:

- 1) If Azir could identify 6-8 apprentices, he could apply for an apprenticeship grant. He is interested in working regularly over a long period of time with a group. It is probably more likely that he will find adults with an interest, which, as I've said above, would be a good start.
- 2) Ethel Raim and/or Martin Koenig would be excellent resources for more information about the traditions Azir practices. He is familiar with their work.
- 3) Identify and document Bosnian needleworkers and the Bosnian cabinet maker recommended by Azir.