

TRANSCRIPT

Multicultural Midwest Oral History Project

Interviewees: Suvad Palavra and Dzenan Becic

Primary Interviewer: Cathy Bongers (C)

Secondary Interviewer: Chris Decker

When: May 3, 2002

Where: Lutheran Social Services, Moorhead (Mr. Palavra's Office)

C: We're going to start by asking Suvad to tell us about yourself like where you were born and where you went to school.

S: I was born in one town called Foca that is about 45 km from the capital city of Sarajevo and I went to school in Sarajevo. I finished it as a mechanical technician. I grew up in Sarajevo since I was five years old as a child.

C: Did you have go to college or did you go to high school?

S: No I finished it like as high school. In Bosnia, it's mandatory to finish eight years of school and after eight years you have the secondary school. Then you choose some occupation. I finished it as a mechanical technician. Like a college.

C: Did any of your family come with you?

S: They stayed. I came with my uncle and I have a mom and two brothers and they are still in Bosnia.

C: Did you ever want to bring them here?

S: My mom doesn't want to come. She thinks she's too old to come to the United States. I'm going to bring my younger brother here. I'll file a Relative Petition for him and sponsor him to come to the United States.

C: Did you ever get a chance to work when you were in Bosnia?

S: No, when I finished schooling during the war and during the war I was drafted in the army so I never worked.

C: So you were drafted in the army, did you fight in the war?

S: Actually, I was not in the front line but I was in the back of the army so....

C: What was that like for you, being in the army and fighting in the war and how did you get out of it?

S: When the war finished I was out, just when the war finished and then I was a refugee in Croatia and I was three months in Croatia. Then I came to the United States.

C: Did you live in a refugee camp in Croatia?

S: Yeah.

C: What were the refugee camps like in Croatia?

S: It was a refugee camp by the sea and had a lot of refugees and it was bad conditions in the tents.

C: So when you first came to the United States what was your first few days like? And where did you first go when you got here?

S: I came first to Fargo, and I was three months in Fargo, and it was . . . everything different when I came to the United States . . . and a different culture.

C: How did you get your job here at LSS?

S: I worked three months at West Central Turkey's in Pelican Rapids and a position was open at Lutheran Social Services. I applied and got the job. I did also translation at the Turkey Plant for Bosnian people who don't speak English at orientation when they start working so I had some kind of reference.

C: Did you you speak English before you came?

S: No.

C: You learned it when you got here?

S: Yes.

C: Did you take a class for that?

S: Yeah, I was for three months in the school in Fargo.

C: It only took you three months to learn English?

S: Yeah, besides the school I learned at home with my dictionary.

C: So what are some of the differences that you have to help immigrants with when they very first get here. It's probably a huge culture shock to them. I mean, what are the hardest things for them?

S: The hardest thing is the language for people who don't speak the language. They have to all learn and make effort. It is hard for the people who work the same job in a different country to get the same job. For example if someone is a doctor he has to go to college again to get certification.

C: So they can't take their occupations with them when they get here? They have to go to school again?

S: They have to go to school again. Some occupations they can and some not.

C: Depending on what occupation they had?

S: Yeah.

C: So what specific services does Lutheran Social Services provide for the refugees when they get here?

S: The main thing we do is resettlement for new arrivals when they get here. Then we help them apply for welfare such as cash assistance, food stamps and medical assistance and apply them to bring relatives or to join the family or reunite a family. Also, help them about immigration paperwork such as green card, travel documents, and many things. And if they need it for . . . we can help them enroll in the school and enroll kids in school.

C: So where do they take classes, and does it cost money?

S: No, it's free. They go to ESL class and in Moorhead it's every day, I think from nine o'clock till four o'clock.

C: Is it at the high school?

S: No, it's not at the high school, it's the . . . it's right in Moorhead, a few blocks from here. I don't know the name of the school . . .

C: And there's no cost for that?

S: No, it's free.

C: How long do they remain on welfare and health and things like that? Or, how long does it usually take them to get into . . .

S: It depends on the family. Some families they are very self-sufficient and they quick learn the language and take any job. But I think in the beginning for the families it's better to take any job and then they make work history and they can go at the same time to school to learn English. I think that's the best.

C: Do you help other refugees besides the ones from Bosnia?

S: I help all refugees. In beginning I helped only from Bosnia but after awhile I helped all refugees.

C: What are the difficulties that they have on a daily basis like shopping, and getting a driver's license, and what happens when they have medical or dental problems that they need to go to the doctor for . . . how do they communicate what's wrong with them? Do they set them up with insurance?

S: Yeah they have medical assistance for eight months The clinic usually provides an interpreter and there is interpreter and translation service in Fargo/Moorhead . . .

C: Okay, I think we'll move to Dzenan, now. So why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself like where you were born and tell us about where you grew up.

D: I was born in Kotorako. It's a small village in by the city of Dobo, it's in north Bosnia. I went to primal school for eight years and after that I went to high school. It's a high school with training like an electrician. I went two years there and in the second year the war started and after that, me, my brother, my mother went to Croatia and then I used to have my uncle in Zagreb. It's the capital from Croatia. We stayed there about three and the complication came in Bosnia between Muslims and the Croats and we had problems also as refugees in Croatia. That was back in '92. We went to Germany to my aunt. She's in Kiel, Germany. We stayed there for seven and a half years. I went there one year in high school and then after that because of the visa In Germany they got uhan example as refugee you can stay like six months and you get the permit for like six months. Every six months you have to go to the institution and renew it. Get a new one again. Because of that I decided to go to take training as a plumber and heating. Because of my visa I get one with one year. So I didn't have to go every six months and this visa

was a better opportunity so I could get a job and stuff like that because with this other one I was able just to go school. I could not work. Nothing. There's a different social service system in Germany that you can get like welfare with medical assistance. I mean that's just the basics needs that you need to get food and stuff like that. After I finished with three and half years with this training, I was trying to get to go to college but that was not possible in Germany as a refugee. So it's a totally different system, people, and culture. It was a different experience.

C: Did your family come to the United States with you?

D: Yes. Well, actually, after seven and a half years in Germany, the German government they had an, I don't know what, an agreement that we have to leave Germany. It was with force or without force. So of course, we decided to go out. Because our village was destroyed and the house and everything is damaged and destroyed it is not possible to live there and that part of Bosnia belongs to the Serbs. So we decided to go to Croatia. I also had one aunt in Croatia. Then we applied for the immigration to the United States.

C: So did you work in Germany?

D: Yes. Actually, you go to school, like, four days. You work and one day you get school. It's something like training like at a technical college. You go for three and half years and when you're done you get certification for that job, so I worked there.

C: So when you came here you couldn't transfer over and do your. . . or do you have to go to school again to do the same thing?

D: When I came here I tried to . . . I actually applied maybe at twenty-five or thirty companies with plumbing and heating. Of course, that was my expectation that I would get refused. Of course, I mean, I don't speak very well English. I don't have a Minnesota

plumbing license. Of course, I've got a German one. I know this job. It's the same system. But of course I've been used to that. To get refused. So I would have to go to school, to a college. But I'm planning right now to save some money and go to college and, technical college.

C: So when you first came to the United States, did you come right to Moorhead?

D: We came, we landed. . . well, actually we landed in Chicago but we came to Moorhead and to Pelican Rapids.

C: Did you work at West Central Turkeys in Pelican, too?

D: No. The thing is, when we came here, my English is of course not so good but the thing was I was trying to get some job that I had been trained for and job that I want to do. Because of course I did not go for nothing for three and half years to learn that and to go to work in some plant. No, I mean that's fine. That kind of job is okay. You get some money for the beginning. But I know that I was able to get some other job, better paying job and much easier job. So we decided to move to Moorhead actually because of the education and because of the better opportunities for the jobs.

C: So you came here and you got a job at . . . Berg Grain and Produce?

D: Well actually first thing, there was my father, he's a wood carver and he worked on this Red Bear restaurant. I worked with my father. Roger Erickson, who is co-owner of this restaurant, he uh...My brother was looking for, my brother was actually the first one who started this job as a truck driver. We spoke with Roger Erickson and he knew this Arnold Berg, he's the boss from this company, and my brother ask him, can he put some good words in for my brother? And of course, he made his license and he started in this company, and me, too.

C: So did you have to go get your CDL license?

D: Yes. Well, actually, I had my CDL license from Europe from Germany but you have a new one. It was fine.

C: So it wasn't that difficult for you to get this job, I guess?

D: Well, I guess this company is very, very nice and people are very friendly. This area of the United States is just great. I like a lot here. I've been traveling around the last half year and this is pretty nice area to live.

C: You like it better than other places?

D: Much better than the South. South, it's . . . I would never live down there. East is just . . . too crowded, too much people. West, I don't know . . . the people just . . . I mean every person is different and everyone has different opinions but it seems so much fake to me on the West Coast.

C: So are there other refugees or immigrants that work at the trucking place with you or only a few of you?

D: Well actually my brother and me were the first ones and then I got friends of us. They also helped us here when came to United States. These friends, they are also going to make a CDL license and start in this company.

C: So I suppose you spend most of the time on the road by yourself, huh?

D: Ninety percent, yes.

C: But when you're at the trucking place, is it hard to work with mostly Americans? Do you have communication problems at all? You're English sounds pretty good to me . . .

D: Well . . . actually . . . sometimes. I had problems when I was in the South. I had problems to understand those people, they've got a different accent. Sometimes, uh...I

had this experience too in Germany, people, even if they understand you, they just pretend that they just don't understand you so you have to repeat yourself. But that's fine. I'm just used to that , so I've got no problems with that.

C: Well I guess I'll go to both of you now, if either one of you guys want to answer these questions. So, do you guys think that discrimination against minorities and refugees is a problem here in Fargo/Moorhead?

S: I don't think . . . that in Fargo/Moorhead it's a lot of discrimination. Well, I didn't see it so far.

D: That's actually a hard question to ask. I mean, it's very, it's almost not possible to feel that here in this area. But discrimination was always here; I mean everywhere, not only in the United States, all over the world. So, I guess that question is kind of hard . . .

S: Discrimination is everywhere.

D: I mean, about this area it's not possible to feel that. I mean, through my experience in this area.

C: So you've never, or someone you know has never been treated unfairly because they were refugees, or they talked a little funny, or no one's ever laughed at you, or made weird looks?

D: (laughing) I can tell that. I will go first. The example here: the good thing was I learned English by myself. It was self-taught and it's . . . the biggest thing it is much easier when you know this language and you know about this culture. I am pretty much into this culture and this society. An example: it's hard now, when sometimes you don't understand something that someone says to you and of course there was a situation that you don't understand and people look at you funny and stuff like that. But here the

people are different. People are trying to help immigrants because this is just a great country. But, for example, in Germany it's total opposite. I mean that's the place that you can feel that you are not welcome as a refugee. When you come there as a tourist you are very much welcome because you spend your money. As a refugee it is totally different.

C: So do you feel separated from . . . opposed to someone who has lived here their whole life? You don't feel separated from them at all?

S: Actually, yeah, but the old friends that I had in Bosnia, it's not the friends that were before that disappear, but no, I just adjusted. And I just want to come back on the first question. I was, when I came to United States, the first time, I was embarrassed to talk and when I started talking to somebody, and was just afraid about telling it properly, and it was hard in the beginning, but I just adjusted

C: Right, so . . . there is a large population of Bosnian refugees in Fargo Moorhead, right?

S: Yes, mostly in Fargo, not many in Moorhead. In Moorhead there are five or six Bosnian families, and most of those families are mixed marriages.

C: Mixed marriages meaning . . .

S: Mixed marriages . . .

D: for example Muslims or Serbs, or Muslims and Croats . . .

S: It's silly but true.

C: What sort of things do they, or you guys, do to preserve your Bosnian heritage or your culture? Do you try to . . .

S: There is the Bosnian restaurant in Fargo. Sometimes we go. (laughing)

C: The Bosnian House?

S: Yes . . .

D: Actually, I am trying to just get into this culture and try to . . . I never felt as a Bosnian from that time in Yugoslavia also when I was going to become a American . . . through all this experience in Bosnia and Croatia, Germany, and through all this time, I just felt like I lose everything . . . like my nationality and everything else, my heritage and everything, so I just don't feel that I have to have that. I mean, it's good to have traditions and everything, but in my eyes, I see myself as a human being. I don't see myself as a Bosnian or American, especially through this war, you know, I lost everything. So I am trying just to be one of these people that lives here.

C: So you are working more on being an American, or . . .

D: I mean, like I said, I like this country here and I like the people and the culture. And, yes I am planning to be American, but I will always see myself as a human being not as any kind of . . . for example, I don't have to be American, Bosnian, or German. It is just the way that other people see that it has to be . . . It's just my personal belief.

C: So what do you guys do for fun? What kind of hobbies do you guys have?

S: (Laughing) We go sometimes to the bar and cinema.

C: Like everybody else?

D: I am into music and I play guitar and I am planning on getting myself some small studio and making recordings, stuff like that.

C: So do you guys . . . obviously I guess you like it here. Do you plan on staying here forever?

S: Yes, I plan to stay, but I want to say that . . . I became an American citizen but I think that I am always some . . . not native citizen because I will always discover my accent. So that . . . it reminds me that I am Bosnian too.

D: In that case, when I came here because we, all people . . . I mean Bosnian refugees, not only from Bosnia, every culture that had this war and stuff like that, it does not matter for what kind of reason that they came here I felt like I am in my home, this is a great place to live.

C: If there was something you could change about Fargo Moorhead, what would it be?

D: (Laughing) I mean I came before one year and I could not . . . I mean, it's not, I would say, right to make change because we just came here. The people that live here for such long time, they should be the ones to make change, but I mean of course there is always something to do and change.

C: Do you guys think that there's still work that needs to be done to help make things better for refugees that come here or, is there any way we can make it easier for them? Do you think people have still work to do on this?

S: I think when refugees come to United States we just need more sponsors and more volunteers, that's the main thing. And I think it is good to continue to have the friendship festival, the international festival, to indicate that something that all Americans came from the different countries.

D: I would say also that there could be, probably, something done with education. I mean, for the beginning ESL, I was also there, like I said, I taught myself English and everything, it was kind of not too easy but I was trying to get the job and stuff like that. For example, for the older people, they could use much more from that. And also, like in the way of education, for the younger people going to finish with a primal school, high school, and college . . . that is the important thing, education always.

C: Do you think it's going to be, or, do you think it will be different for you when you go to college here that it was . . .

D: I always try to adjust to this country. I mean, of course it's going to be hard, because of the language, but like I said, this is my favorite language English. I don't think there is going to be that much problem so, it's just . . . every beginning's hard.

C: Do you think that the field you are in is going to be different when you learned was it Germany you went to school for?

D: No actually I learned through music and dictionaries that is how I learn English. In Germany I learned German.

C: Do you think that, you went to school for plumbing and heating, was it?

D: Yes.

C: Do you think that the field of plumbing and heating is going to be any different here then it was there?

D: The only thing possible, that could be different, is the standards, like the codes, but every system, the basic system and everything is the same in Europe, United States, it does not matter were.

C: So, do you guys feel you have a better life here then if you would of stayed there?

S: Yeah, I think so.

D: If that war would not happened, I don't know, it's hard to say. But of course definitely, right now, after everything happened, yes.

S: Yeah, if the ex-Yugoslavia remained, I think that's one of the best countries, but after the war started in Yugoslavia . . .it was horrible.

D: I mean, we are able to get ourselves a job. For example, like, I don't have to go every six months to some kind institution to get my visa so I can go somewhere. And I will get my American citizenship, and I can move around where I want to go. Example, in Germany, if I want to go twenty-five miles from that city I would have to go and get some permit. Only because I was a refugee.

C: So the United States seemed like the only option . . . for you to come here?

D: Well, actually, my . . . when we was in Croatia, as a family, we only had one goal: to get out of there. It does not matter: Australia, Canada, USA. It was just . . . it mattered just to go away, so we can get somewhere, one place we can stay, we can get our citizenship and we won't be treated as like, I don't know, second class people, or whatever.

C: Are you still waiting to be a citizen here, or are you already?

D: No I just applied for a green card! (laughing)

C: So how long have you been here?

D: I came last year, February 20th.

C: You've only been here a year?

D: Yes.

C: And did you learn English all while you were here?

D: Like I said, 90% of my English was self-taught. I like music and, like I said English is my favorite language, so it's just . . .

C: Suvad said that he learned English in three months!

D: Well the thing is, when you come, for example, in the United States you have to get your self, you've got to go to the store. you have to go to buy stuff, you have to go to the

bank, you have to learn, it is more pressure. You have to. Nobody asks you, you just have to learn.

S: In our country, the system is, from the fourth grade, as a child, you have to take a second language. And I learned German. Some of the places learned English, some of them, French, most of them Russia.

D: In my school I had to learn Russian.

C: You had to learn how many languages?

S: Just one, but it depends on the classes you had.

C: Did you learn German, then, when you were in Germany too?

D: The thing about it, I just want to say something else about our school system . . . when you learn alphabet, in the first grade, it's a Bosnian alphabet, and also we got second alphabet. It's Cyrillic, that is the Serb, then after that in the fourth grade comes a different language. You have to learn, it does not matter which one. In my school, it was only one—Russian. So I had to learn it. I would have liked . . . I would have tried to learn English but I could not, I mean, that was the system so . . .

C: So you had to learn the Bosnian language and Russian?

D: Yes I mean that is my native language, Bosnian, so we learned that anyway. Yeah, in Germany, yes, I learned German in Germany of course, but that was also different. I came there . . . and I went to high school, and it's different, when you learn from friends it's different. When you have someone from that, example, German . . . it's much easier when people, friends try to help you to learn that language, and when you go to official school everyday, and you get home work to do and stuff, it's different. Example, right now, I am most of the time in trucks, so it's very hard to learn with truckers . . . English.

C: So do you think it is easier to learn by yourself or from other people and music and things than to learn it in class?

D: I don't know, it is different, people are different and everyone has different ways of learning. My thing was, I don't know how, but I learned because I like this language and . . .

S: I think it is better to learn in classes. In Moorhead, it is good, the people spend eight hours in school and I only had the two hours. I think with every day, all day that you are in the class, you can learn the best language.

C: So you speak four languages then?

D: Yes, I mean my Russian is not so good I have not spoken any more I have not spoken for maybe eight years. But still I can remember some.

C: And you probably speak . . .

S: Yes, I speak English and I know a few words from Spanish, French and German.

C: I suppose you have to deal with a lot of other refugees and things like that?

S: Yeah.

C: You guys really don't feel like anyone you know has ever been treated unfairly here, or anything like that, because I know we got a minority report here in Moorhead that says that there was definitely a lot of discrimination going on here in Moorhead, and Fargo..

S: Maybe . . . maybe I had . . . but I can't remember, in the beginning, when I got here, I had one discrimination when I was. . . but that person was a drunk.

(END OF SIDE ONE)

D: I think that discrimination is always here, and that it will never end, but I, like I said, I just learn to, I find a way how to deal with that people that try to discriminate me, maybe

it was something here, but I don't think so, here. Most things I had in Germany; Germany was terrible, in Germany.

C: Did you think it was a little unfair you had to apply so many times to so many of those jobs and you couldn't get it, just because you had schooling in another country?

D: Of course, of course I understand that. I also understand different things, it is hard for those companies also, I have to first learn every single word, technical word, for every tool, for everything that I have to use. I understand that, but it is still unfair, but that is the way that it is.

C: So do you guys know any body that has gotten to continue with the occupation they had?

S: I know some people, but I know some person in Moorhead who has 30 years experience, like TV and radio mechanic, and he cannot get a job because . . . and he is fluent in English. Maybe people, they don't trust him, but I believe that he's . . . many of the workers, he's better than what they have, but he doesn't have the opportunity to show what he knows. And I know, I was his home . . . and he has many televisions and computers . . . he's intelligent, but he doesn't have an opportunity to show it.

C: So, you said your father was a woodcarver?

D: That was his hobby, actually, his real job is accounting, is an accountant. He worked in Bosnia for over twenty-five years. And he actually took one program with Suvad, about accounting. I mean, my father is over fifty, and having problems with English, but still, he's very good at his job, and the only thing that he doesn't understand are the words. But he's . . . tried to learn, and . . .

S: We had that tax class, like tax for volunteers . . .

C: To do your taxes?

S: Yeah, for refugees.

C: So you help the refugees do taxes?

S: Yeah, in Pelican Rapids.

C: So, your dad, and your mom, and do you have brothers. . .

D: One brother, yes. . .

C: They're all here with you?

D: Yes.

C: Do they continue with their jobs or anything?

D: Not really . . . like I said, my father he is right now, got some projects doing woodcarving, he's making everything. He's making, like, five mantle, headboards, coffeetables, and everything that people want to have, and that's the kind of thing that's he likes to do, and he's very good, he's a very good artist. But his real job is accounting, but he also does all different kind of stuff, so . . .

C: So, was he in the paper? Was there an article about him in the Fargo *Forum*?

D: Yes.

C: I thought so! Well that is all the questions I have for you, I guess, do you guys want to add anything to this tape?

S: No I think we covered all, most . . .

D: Well, just like I said, I've always felt great that I had this opportunity to come here and to be here and that's all, and this is just great place to live, especially this part of the United States.

C: Well, we're happy to have you here!

S: Thank you!

D: Thank you!