



Religion & Forced Migration Initiative

Princeton University's Office of Religious Life

Sabina Mujanovic, Bosnian War Refugee

Interviewed by Meryem Konjhodzic via Phone on 7/18/2020

Transcribed by Alison Parish 6/30/21

(03:35) **Meryem:** My name is Meryem. I am the interviewer for today. The date is July 18th, 2020. I am located in Sarajevo, Bosnia Herzegovina. This interview will be conducted remotely via phone. Now let's introduce our narrator. The narrator is Sabina Mujanovic and she is located in Dallas, TX. So, Tetka, how are you?

(04:09) **Sabina:** I'm doing good. I'm actually in Arlington right now, but it's nearby.

(04:17) **Meryem:** So, Tetka, where are you from?

(04:21) **Sabina:** Yes. So, I'm from Banja Luka, Bosnia. That is the second largest city in the country.

(04:33) **Meryem:** Yes, and you are a refugee. So, can you tell me a little bit about that process of going through a war and how it actually started? How old you were? What it was like for you and your family?

(04:46) **Sabina:** Ok, so the war started roughly about 1992, I wanna say. I'm trying to remember. But, when Bosnia proclaimed its independence. I was in middle school at that time, seventh grade. It was pretty uneventful for me at the beginning because it was just political tension here and there. There was a lot of political talk on the news from my parents, but I didn't get myself too much into it until people started leaving the city. That was- that started happening actually at the end of 1991 because the war first broke out in Croatia. Then, it moved into Bosnia territory. So, since we lived in the city, Banja Luka was predominantly Serb city, the Serb population was dominant. They had all of the army located from where the attacks were taken on to the other cities were going out of the town that I lived in. So, I've seen a lot of soldiers. I've seen

a lot of artillery. Nothing was used inside our city because it was already occupied by Serbs. So, there was nobody to attack there. So, they pretty much called it territory.

(06:19) So, being Muslim in a predominantly Serb town started to become really difficult because the pressures were more psychological nature; to where you could hear that one person would be thrown out of their apartment for no reason other than they had a Muslim name. The same was happening with the people who were Croats, who were Catholic Christians. They had the same destiny as Muslims in my city. So, they started evacuating. They started leaving because the conditions within the city were difficult.

(07:07) Bosnia Muslims and Croats equally were being fired from their jobs, including my father who was a judge and he held a high position. After he was let go from his position, without any explanation, he was then pulled to then be basically a slave. He worked as, what they called it, as civilian duty which was only for Muslims and Croats. They would be gathered up every morning at 6 o'clock, in the morning, and they would be taken outside of the city to either dig up trenches or pick up fruit or do labor work to clean the streets. So, my dad who was a well-respected person in the community who has been asked to do these tasks for no other reason than for being Muslim. That was the only thing that he was deserving of at the time. That is how we were treated.

(08:06) Then, we had constant calls via phone where they would threaten us that we needed to leave, that it's time to go. So, we basically lived in fear. We lived to ourselves. We didn't really go to many places other than just staying home. We didn't have any ways to hear the news from the Muslim territory. All the media was controlled by Serbs. So, all we heard were how Muslims were the ones that were torturing, but on the occasion of our little radio that we had we would have to close all the blinds in the house. So, that no one would see that we had this little radio that we would occasionally pick up a frequency from the [Sarajevo?] radio which was Bosnian radio that we would actually hear the right news which was what was really happening. That was when we actually found out that [Sarajevo?] had been under siege. My dad had family there and so we were constantly on alert, stressed out, worried. Muslims were leaving the city, day by day. Overnight, I'd lose a friend and they wouldn't even tell me they were leaving until they left the town.

(09:24) So, a lot has happened in that time. I continued going to school, but all of my Muslim teachers were fired. So, the majority of the kids in my class were Serbs. The kids were not mean. They didn't say anything mean to me per say, but they would say nationalist stuff like *Serbs will rule this place*. Overnight, you would see the signs over the [coffee bars] which say Muslims and dogs are not allowed to come in. I mean, there were so many discriminatory, openly horrible things that had been said

to us. Even when doctors said that he would do free abortions for Muslim women because...

(11:18) **Meryem**

Hello, Tetka, my internet cut off. The last part where you were at, you were talking about how the doctors were offering free abortions for Muslim women.

(11:27) **Sabina**

Yeah, they would just say that. It's not that they were offering it, but it was just like a message to be sent. We are happy to do this for free, so you don't continue to reproduce, basically. So, it was a message to all the Muslims that there was no place for us in that city anymore. I had seen many prisoners of Bosnia- Bosnian prisoners that had passed in our city with their blindfolds on. Later, we heard that they ended up in concentration camps. That was an everyday occurrence. Soldiers would just be shooting in the air - shooting everywhere, just to prove their dominance and prove how powerful they were. They would intimidate people in the street. They would ask for your identification to make sure that you were not a Muslim or Croat just roaming around the city. There was just a lot going on. Occasionally, there was this little red minivan that would go around the city. If they would identify somebody as Muslim, they would ask for your ID and they would know Muslims by their names. They would throw them in their minivan and they would beat them. I've seen this actually happen in person as a 12 year old girl just going through the city.

(13:02) One time, I remember my dad - he never left our apartment. But, that day for some reason, he had to go and I was returning from school. I remember seeing the minivan that was known for that and I was terrified that they caught my dad. I remember running home, because at that time we didn't have cell phones or anything like that, so I just ran home to make sure that- to warn my dad not to go on this street or that street because I spotted the minivan.

(13:35) So, that was kind of the atmosphere that I was growing up in from 1992, roughly 1991, until January of 1995 when we had, at that point, we saw that we couldn't survive there. The Serbian army actually came to our apartment. They said it was a random search. They took all of our money. They intimidated me and my sisters. They locked us in the bedroom and they wouldn't let us talk to each other. We were little. We were 8th grade/7th grade, something like that. So, there were three of us and we were by ourselves. They were intimidating us, asking if we were supporting Muslim army in Sarajevo. *What did we have to do with that?* We were just children. We had no idea what they were saying. I had a piano in my bedroom and he asked which one of us played the piano. I said that I did. He said, "Why don't you start playing us the Serb nationalist songs?" I said that I didn't know them. I didn't know how to play those songs. He just took the cover of the piano and just

smashed it down to basically just intimidate me kind of like, yes you are going to play or not going to play or whatever. So, we were just intimidated. I was scared. I was terrified and after that, they came back several more times. I remember having nightmares as a result. I couldn't sleep. We were just scared they were gonna come and kill us all.

(15:32) Fortunately enough for us, that didn't happen. So, my mom, who was really the fighter in our family. She somehow managed to get us on the list of people to get out of the city. You have to remember at that time, they wanted you to give them everything you owned and even then, you were not sure if you were going to be able to get on the bus and go. So, I remember, my mom was telling me, "Sabina, there are 11 buses scheduled to go out of Banja Luka." This was in December. We were on the eleventh bus and only one maybe left every so many months. So, being the eleventh bus and only one or two would leave in a month meant that maybe we would not leave for another year which felt like a death sentence because we knew we didn't have that much time.

(16:30) Fortunately, there is always one person that is good in any people, in any nation really. There was a man who my mom worked for. He was her director at her place and he actually somehow managed to get us on this list and helped provide us transportation to the bus station from which we left. We left in January of 1995. It was extreme conditions. It was extremely cold. We didn't know where we were going. We just knew we were leaving the country to go to Croatia to a refugee camp. Even though everybody was telling us, *don't go right now. It is horrible. It's cold. You may not make it.* But, we thought that was our only way out. So, we went ahead and got on the buses. It was a very short ride. Only 40 miles, I wanna say. But, it took us all day. We started at 4 in the morning, but we didn't cross over into Croatian territory until late that day. On the buses we were searched and searched and searched and the little money that we had was also taken away. Men were separated from the women, when we were searched.

(17:55) I just remember talking to my grandma and she was a very very religious person. So, she said Nina don't worry. I'm praying for you. God is with us. You have no reason to be worried because God is always with the good people. Somehow that kept me going and I just kept saying the prayers over and over in my head just so that we can cross over alive. After all that 14 hours, however long that trip was, we finally [came?] to the free territory. So, that you have like a picture in your head of what that looks like: it was just an empty field. It was a big tent, two white tents. It said, "Welcome to the Nepalian territory." or something. It was like the UN forces from Nepal. They were there and it was their tent. Around it, it was a barbed wire and it was all labeled as a minefield. So, we only had very few, I don't know how many square inches of territory that we could actually walk on that was not covered with

mines. So, I don't know how much you wanna know about that area, but it was extremely difficult to live there for over a month. There was water, but there was no way to take a shower. So, we were just lucky that it wasn't summer, so that we wouldn't die of infection. So, that helped, but it was really bad since it was really cold.

(19:35) I remember waking up with icicles on my head because it was just negative 10 Celsius or something like that or even 12. I don't even know. I remember the water was always frozen. Yeah, so we stayed there a month. After which, we were transported to a refugee camp, which was a real refugee camp where actually they had placement. In the area that we were in where we crossed the territory, it was called the *UN Zone*, which was really nothing. It was just an open field with those tents that would actually have the capacity of maybe a hundred people and nobody was leaving the tents. So, the more people were coming in, so the capacity was maybe a hundred. But, we had at one point maybe three hundred people just packed like sardines next to each other because there was nobody going out.

(20:30) So, anyway, all that to say we ended up in Croatia in a refugee camp, in a city called Jakabo. That is where we lived until July of 1995. After that, we were able to get to the United States.

(20:56) **Meryem** So, in those refugee camps, could you tell me a little bit more about your daily lives? Did you have any sort of education? What it felt like to be traveling with these younger sisters, with an old grandma, with your parents and actually not knowing what's gonna happen in the next few months?

(21:19) **Sabina** So, when we got there, we didn't have-. Let me tell you what we did gain. Even though we left everything behind, we also were free of fear. When you are free of fear, you really start to understand the beauty in little things and how important relationships are, how important your mother is and your sister and your grandma and a friend. During those times, even though living conditions were awful - we were getting food even cats didn't want to eat. It was so disgusting, but that's the food we were getting. But even then, that was not a huge stressor for me. I did not suffer from that per say because I felt like nobody could hurt me or nobody could hurt my mom or nobody could hurt my sister. So, I felt a huge sense of relief with that and knowing that maybe better days would come. People were leaving. They would send us postcards that they made it to the United States or they made it to a country within Europe, usually Sweden, Norway, Denmark. That is where people would go.

(22:33) But during those days, how my day was filled? It was actually-. My dad wanted us to go to school even though a lot of kids went to elementary school, but nobody went to high school because we were in transit. So, nobody even bothered to enroll

themselves in a high school. But, my dad insisted, so my sister and I and maybe two or three other kids from the refugee camp had to get on the bus every morning and be driven out to the actual city where we-. [Jakabo] was the city. We lived in the [Dashisi] which was the name of the refugee camp. So, every morning, I would have - we didn't have a bathroom in our little houses that we were in - so we would have to get up early in the morning. Go to a shared bathroom with all these people. Brush my teeth. Get ready. Get on the bus. Go to school and then come back.

(23:32) I finished 10th grade along with my sister in the general highschool in [Jakabo]. So, it was one semester. We came in January and the school finished in, I wanna say, May. But, we left Croatia in July. So, I made a lot of friends during that time and what was freeing and nice is that people were all in the same situation. There was no backbiting. Everybody was happy for each other. Whoever made it out, we were excited for them. The days when people would leave were really difficult because we cry a lot. You would say a lot of goodbyes. You knew you would probably never see them again, so that part was heart wrenching because everyday somebody was leaving. Even though they were going to a better place in our head, it was still a final goodbye. So, those friendships, I continue still via facebook with people I had gotten really close to in refugee camp and those are the people that you will never forget because that is that unique experience that no one else has. You will never come across people like that. So, I cherish those.

(24:52) We had a lot of volunteers and there was one volunteer from Spain. They came from all-. They came from the United States. They lived with us in the refugee camp as well and they did activities with the kids. So, I was a part of those things. We had our mosque that was pretty active. They had a lot of activities there. My grandmother was also part of a Sunday school and my little sister went to an onsite elementary school that they had. It was, like, in a little building. It wasn't even a building. It looked, everything was very much improvised. They tried to bring some normalcy to our lives by having responsibilities and going to school. Everybody was just so united and it felt actually pretty good being in a refugee camp even though the conditions, living conditions were bad. The people were really united and very supportive of each other.

(25:56) **Meryem**

Yeah, so then, you were in Croatia and then you guys got the news that you were going to America? Can you explain a little bit about that and how you actually came to America?

(26:05) **Sabina**

So, we never really intended to go to the United States. We wanted to stay in Europe because we were hopeful that the war would end and that we could just go back.

That was initially what we had hoped for. But, my mom's sister lived in Australia and we were in continuous contact with her during this time and she said that she would do whatever is required for us to actually move to Australia. We filled out all the paperwork. Very few people actually left for Australia, very very few. Majority of people went to the United States or to the countries in Northern Europe, but we applied and unfortunately, we were rejected. We were told that nobody in our family died. Nobody was raped. Nobody lost a limb, so it wasn't on the severity-. We were not considered as severe of a case as Australia sort of required. So, we were denied. It was a really difficult time for us because my aunt was the only person we knew outside of our country. She wanted us to come. She was getting ready for us to come. She was so convinced that we were going to make it, but unfortunately, we didn't.

(27:36) The next thing they offered us, when we were denied entrance to Australia, we were told that we could apply to be accepted into the United States. Because we had higher chances. My family consisted of my mom, dad, my two other sisters, and a grandma. So, there were 6 of us and because we were younger, they said the United States would be the best possible place for us because we would have a chance to go to school, a chance at prosperity in life. So, my dad went ahead and applied. He was interviewed by- they call them United States officers. So, I don't know if they were officers of the army. I was not part of that interview. They only interviewed one, the head of the household which was my dad. He asked my dad what he wanted. If he could pick any place in the United States, where would he wanna go? My dad said, *I don't have a preference as to which city or what state. As long as there is, the only thing I am hoping for is for my three daughters to go to school and to be educated. So, any city in the United States that has university is where I would- I wouldn't care where it was. Alaska. Florida. Whatever, it doesn't matter.*

(29:02) So, within a week, we got acceptance. The United States has accepted us and we need to go through this rigorous physical examination to make sure that we don't have any communicable diseases. That we don't have AIDS. They needed to know everything about us from our fingerprints, our blood types to our X-rays of our lungs. It was a very rigorous check that we had to go through as refugees to ensure that we are not bringing any diseases to the United States. So, at that point, we have gone through all those checks they have issued, we still didn't know where we were gonna go. We were just issued seven days prior to our departure, they would list the names of the people who were leaving and it would just say: *Family* -. My last, maiden, name was [Humzic], so it said: *Family [Humzic], Jacksonville, Florida*, which we were like, *Ok, cool. There is the beach. Or close to the beach anyway.* We were excited to go to Florida. Only two, for whatever reason, they changed our destination the day before. There was never (an) explanation as to why. They just wrote, *DFW*. We didn't even know what *DFW* meant. Later, we learned it was for Dallas Fort worth Airport which was obviously Dallas, Texas. That is how we got here!

(30:40) **Meryem**

So, you came here and I assume you almost had nothing with you. So, then what happened to you? When were you settled? What was that adjustment like? I assume you also started high school in Texas and there is an obvious language barrier. Could you talk about those things a little bit.

(31:01) **Sabina**

Yeah, so we came here July 11th which was an unfortunate day in Bosnian history. That's where over 8,000 people in [Serevenija?] had been shot to death. We came here in a horrible state, knowing that is what we left behind. We almost felt a little guilty that we escaped. We had that survival guilt. We actually made it out alive when thousands of people were slaughtered.

(31:31)

Anyways, so we came that night. It was extremely hot. Texas is extremely hot compared to Bosnia. It was like 110 degrees. It was insanely hot and I was thinking in my head, *if we didn't die of the war, we'll definitely die of heat* - because it was just horrible! But anyway, we had 2 people from an organization called, War Relief, that came to pick us up at the airport. They identified us based on the sticker that my dad had to have on his sweater that basically said that we are refugees. That is how we were identified. They picked us up. I knew very little English. They drove us for what it felt like forever. We came to a little house that did not have air conditioning. That we shared with one Vietnamese family. It was so hot inside of the house that the Vietnamese man from this other refugee family actually slept outside in his underwear which was a complete shock for us. There were roaches everywhere. It was horrible, horrible conditions. They told us it was going to be temporary because we were such a large family and no apartment complex they could find in such short notice. Because apparently, they didn't know we were coming.

(32:51) Anyway, after a few days, we were transported to another house where my parents actually still live today. They bought that house and it's theirs now, but it was belonging to a Methodist church. The church didn't have anything to do with us as far as providing us with housing. We were paying the rent. But, eventually, after their membership kind of dwindled down, they sold us the house for very cheap and they did it because they felt like we deserved it as refugees to get a very very cheap price. My parents paid \$39,000 for the house. It was 3 bedrooms, 1 bathroom that they still live in.

(33:32) Anyways, so when we got here. The adjustment was really difficult because nobody spoke the language. We had a lot of help from one particular family. It was a husband and wife. The wife was a physician. She wanted to, kind of dedicated her life

to helping refugees. She was an anesthesiologist, so she kept coming to our home. She kept helping us. She was teaching us English. She was taking us places, me and my sisters. My mom and dad, they quickly were told they needed to get a job. So, people from a nearby mosque actually came over and gave us a car which was an older car, but we were so grateful because we had no money. Within so many months, we started getting notices that we needed to pay back our airplane tickets because we came for free, but nothing we learned was really free. We had to pay that back. So, we were already in debt: \$6,000 or something like that in debt from that airplane tickets that flew us over here to come as refugees. So, my mom got a job at a restaurant, Church's Chicken fast food place. She was frying chicken for like \$4.75 an hour. My dad got a labor job at a nearby factory. It was very difficult. They made minimum wage. We didn't have medicaid. We had food stamps which we were extremely grateful for because those things were very necessary. My grandmother was sick. She had congestive heart failure, so there were a lot of appointments that I had to go with her to. We had people from the agency that took us, enrolled us, helped us get our social security cards and all that paperwork that you need to start a life. So, they did a lot for us in that regard. Then, we were told to go to school. That was difficult when you are a teenager and you come here. Everyone's biggest problem was which car they are going to buy and over here I just came from a war torn country and I couldn't really relate to anything that was going on. I didn't realize how difficult it was for Americans here. They had a lot of family dynamic issues: a lot of people that I work with, a lot of people that I went to school with. A lot of divorces. A lot of boyfriends, girlfriends for mom and dad which was a completely strange concept for me. So, that was an adjustment.

(36:19) It was an adjustment to be the only people that didn't have a car. That was not something that I even strived for. I just wanted to get out of high school, but that's when I learned that I couldn't really graduate from high school because we didn't take the state required exam which was now is called *Star Test*, but it was called [Toss Test in Town??] which Texas required unless you passed the test, English, Math, and Reading. I think Writing, Reading, and Math. If you didn't pass it, you couldn't graduate and that was a huge stressor for me because I wanted to go to school and this test was really difficult even for native speakers. So, that was difficult, but anyways we ended up passing. Thank God. It was a huge relief when I got those and actually we got good scores which was shocking. Anyway, I still had to kind of, both my sister and I, realized that we couldn't really survive on my family's income. So, we both got jobs. We were first working as sackers in a grocery store and then we graduated to a cashier position. My other sister, she worked in the photo lab and I worked as a cashier. I felt very privileged to have that job. After that, I did really well in school given that I didn't speak English well at the time, but our schools are so much more difficult than they are here in the United States that it was rather easy. The content was easy. The requirements were very low. So, it was actually easy thing to do

for us. So, I was accepted in the local university here in Arlington, UTA, University of Texas Arlington. I started - enrolled - as a full time college student. My friend who I was telling you about, the physician. She helped me get a job at a hospital and I have been with that hospital system for a very long time. I worked with them for almost 18 years. I recently transferred to do something different, but yeah there was that. I don't know how much more detail you want this to be.

(38:48) **Meryem**

So, I would just wanna ask maybe one more question. So, you obviously came from Banialuka, from an environment where you felt the psychological pressure because of your ethnicity. You are [INDECIPHERABLE] and because of your religion, also. Primarily, you are Muslim. So, coming with this Muslim mindset, background, did you feel or experience any sort of discrimination here in America? Or what role did religion play in your life here in America?

(39:22) Ok, so that's a good question. Being Muslim and being fearful of people knowing that back home because that was the reason why we left - because we were Muslim. Not for any other reason. We didn't do any harm to anybody. Coming over here, I was so pleasantly surprised how Americans didn't seem to care about your religion. One important thing to mention is that nobody in my family except for my grandmother in my family wears a cover, wears the hijab - head covering. So, it's not immediately obvious that we are Muslim based on how we look or what we wear. So, I never felt any issues with the American people when it came to my religion. Although, it's very [INDECIPHERABLE] when I saw that they were very accepting and kind about it, I would share. They genuinely wanted to know because a lot of these churches were part of this refugee resettlement program, so they genuinely wanted to know what we believed. What were our views of Jesus because that was, you know, living in the South, it's called the Bible Belt. Everybody seems to belong to some type of church. So, in that sense, I also felt a difference, but not in a bad way. Everyone seemed very accepting and wanted to learn, wanted to hear what we believed and how we prayed. There was never a point of conflict or issue for me. Since I do come from a religious family, we did continue to go to the mosque. We were accepted by the Muslim community very much because they've had their struggles. They knew what refugee life looks like. So, they were extremely kind. They would come check on us. They would bring us food. Sometimes, we had so much food. It was kind of unreal how much people wanted us to eat. We have learned those bad habits and now we all struggle with our weights sort of. Anyway, as far as religion goes, it was never a point or an issue until 9/11 when everything changed for a lot of Muslims, including my sister, who now wears a hijab. We are always worried that people are gonna lash out. So far, thank God, nothing like that has happened to us and we are very grateful. That's pretty much it.

(42:21) **Meryem**

Ok, thank you so much for that Tetka. You were really short and to the point.
Everything was clear and thank you so much for that.

End