

Georgian Boxers Lost Amid War

Written by Ron Borges

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Mike Moynihan thought he had it all worked out for Mamuka Jikurashvili, Levan Jomardashvili and his brother Shalva. Then the tanks started to roll and the guns went off and three young Georgian boxers were left in limbo.

Had they hailed from the state of Georgia you might be reading about them as three young prize fighters on the rise by now but their lot was to be born in what is the war-torn country of Georgia, which was invaded by the Russian military on the very day Moynihan had them set up to begin a journey to veteran trainer Don Turner's training camp in the wilds of western North Carolina.

"What happened to them could happen to anyone in the world we live in today," said Moynihan, a former aide to retired Massachusetts Congressman Brian Donnelly before Donnelly left the House of Representatives to become ambassador to Trinidad in 1993. The Boston-based lawyer has for some time helped professional athletes from foreign countries work out their immigration and visa problems so they could ply their trade in the U.S., a skill that was an outgrowth of his work helping some of Donnelly's constituents with similar visa and immigration problems.

Serendipity is so often a part of such matters that the difficulties the three Georgian fighters now face is hardly new to Moynihan, who began working with foreign fighters because long-time trainer Goody Petronelli's gym just happened to be in Congressman Donnelly's district. A few problems arose with some of Petronelli's foreign-born fighters and Moynihan dealt with them. Next thing he knew he was getting calls from hockey players and representatives of several Irish fighters hoping to get work visas that would allow them to train and fight in the U.S.

They included junior middleweight Ian Gardner and heavyweight Kevin McBride, who was the last man to defeat Mike Tyson, but never has he faced a situation quite like the one that happened on July 25, the day a photocopy began what has turned into a nightmarish odyssey for the three Georgian boxers.

"Jim Borzell (matchmaker for Irish Ropes, the promotional company that handles middleweight contender John Duddy) introduced me to a guy from Seattle, Egis Klimas, who was an informal advisor to a fighter in Kazakhstan (rising light heavyweight prospect and former Olympian Beibut Shumenov, who out pointed former light heavyweight champion Montell Griffin on Aug. 2 and stopped Donnell Wiggins and Lavell Finger within 12 days of each other in April)," Moynihan said.

"He asked me to help them put together visa requests for three fighters in Georgia. (New York state athletic commission executive director) Ron Scott Stevens and Don Turner helped out with some letters of support and there was really no problem with immigration. I cabled the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi and they approved a visa for a year for them as athletes/entertainers and everything was set.

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“It’s a pretty expensive process because the filing fees probably run \$2000 per fighter because we asked for an expedited process. Everything was fine. But when the three fighters got to the Embassy they first had to deal with a local person who looked at their paperwork. They’d been sent their approvals electronically and the guy said they couldn’t use a photocopy of their paperwork, which was wrong. That was on July 25.

“They went to get the original paperwork but when they got back there was another complaint about it even though everything was in order. That was a week ago. The Embassy stopped issuing visas the next day because the problems with Russia had begun and a war was on.”

At least three prize fighters now understand the difference between fistic wars and real ones because they are captives, in a sense, of that difference. The three remain somewhere in Georgia although Moynihan did not know if they had returned to their hometowns or continued living in Tbilisi under the protection of the Georgia Boxing Association, which had been aiding them.

Moynihan has since tried to work through the Armenian embassy as well as the one in Buku, but travel restrictions have prevented them from moving any closer to getting to North Carolina. The Jomardashvili brothers are natives of Gori, a town that has become the epicenter of the battle between Russian and Georgian troops after the Georgian army briefly moved into South Ossetia, a community bordering Russia and one whose control has been long in dispute. Although the Georgian army has since retreated the Russian invasion continues, a political and military move that has left the three boxers unsure of what their next move is or where they are headed.

“Once the war was on the U.S. embassy closed its visa section,” Moynihan explained. “We have an embassy in Buku that said it would help but the travel restrictions at the moment have prevented them from going anywhere. It’s too dangerous because there are now criminal gangs in the streets and the Soviet Army could stop them and hold them if they’re trying to drive to the border. I don’t know where they’re living at the moment.

“Two of them left their wives behind to come to the U.S. and try to get their boxing careers going. They had a lot of success over there but they understood they needed to move to get ahead in boxing.”

Only one of the 61 fights the three have been involved in has been outside of Georgia so their true talents have yet to be tested but Shalva is an undefeated middleweight prospect (25-0, 18 KO), Levan is an unbeaten light heavyweight (16-0, 13 KO) and Jikurashvili (20-1, 14 KO) has only one loss, to undefeated former Cuban Olympian Odlanier Solis in Turkey.

The two brothers were a combined 127-5 as amateurs and won eight national titles. Jikurashvili is a three-time national amateur champion and is presently Georgian heavyweight title holder, for what that may be worth. All three are presently managed by Klimas of E Point K Consulting, a Seattle-based manager who also handles Demarcus “Chop Chop” Corley.

The Jomardashvili brothers were among many residents of Gori, a town of about 50,000, who

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became refugees after the Russian military began bombing the town not long after the simmering conflict boiled over. Now they sit somewhere in Tbilisi along with Jikurashvili waiting for the fighting to stop long enough so their fighting can begin a long, long way from home while Turner, the former trainer of Evander Holyfield among many others, waits in North Carolina for news of the whereabouts of his newest boxers, three fighters trapped in a war they had nothing to do with.