Пише: Ron Grossman
недеља, 05 септембар 2010 14:14

(Chicago Tribune, September 5, 2010)

Class-action suit: U.S. mercenaries were behind Croatian offensive in Balkan War

Serbian immigrants seek answers about the horror

Zivka Mijic, 46, talks about her family's narrow escape from Croatia in the Balkan War. She and her family now live in Stickney. (Zbigniew Bzdak, Chicago Tribune)

Zivka Mijic doesn't burden people with her troubles — which would be impractical anyway, unless the other person spoke Serbian — but she does want the tragic story of what brought her family to a Chicago suburb told in federal court.

"If I had even a spoon from over there, I'd hang it on the wall to remember," Mijic, 46, said. Her son Branislav Mijic, 23, was translating. Alternating between his mother's words and his own, Branislav explained why the Mijics have no souvenirs of their homeland.

On Aug. 4, 1995, artillery shells started falling on a village in Krajina, where the Mijics lived in what had been Yugoslavia before ethnic conflicts tore it apart. The Mijics harnessed theirhorses Soko and Cestar to a wagon and joined the crowd of fleeing villagers. It was 2 in the morning, the artillery fire lighting up a neighbor who had been traveling with them. He was decapitated by an incoming shell.

"If you weren't there, you can't feel what it was like," said Zivika, who lives with her husband, Nedeljko, 46, three sons and a sister in a modest home in Stickney, no different from

neighboring ones except for the bitter memories it houses. In a way, the Mijics' saga is a common denominator of the immigrant experience: Driven abroad by war, poverty or oppression, families rebuild their lives in America.

But there is an unexpected, albeit difficult to prove, twist to the Mijics' story: The class-action lawsuit recently filed in Chicago, to which Zivka is a party, alleges that American mercenaries were behind their suffering.

As her lawyers see it, during the Balkan War of the 1990s, America began to "outsource" some of the dirty work of war and diplomacy to private contractors. They allege that behind the early morning attack that the Croats dubbed "Operation Storm" was a northern Virginia-based consulting company called MPRI Inc., made up of former high-ranking U.S. military officers that included a chief architect of Operation Desert Storm a few years earlier in Iraq.

What the Mijics and other Serbs in Croatia went through, their lawyers allege, was a proving grounds for the kind of brutal strategy orchestrated later in Iraq by the now infamous Blackwater Worldwide company, another private military contractor whose security guards were charged by the Justice Department in 2008 with killing at least 17 Iraqi civilians during a firefight the year before.

"MPRI is the granddaddy of Blackwater ," said Robert Pavich, one of the lawyers representing Mijic and other Serbs.

MPRI was acquired in 2002 by another defense contractor, L-3 Communications. Officials from L-3 say the lawsuit is baseless.

"The suit is without merit, and L-3 intends to vigorously defend itself against these charges. Beyond that, the company has no additional comment at this time," said L-3 spokeswoman Jennifer Barton in an e-mailed statement.

Since the events, the company has consistently denied involvement in the Krajina offensive. But it has benefited from speculation that it took part in it, said a former senior U.S. diplomat deeply

knowledgeable in the Balkan Wars.

"The perception that they did run it helped turn them from a small company to a major contractor," the diplomat said. "Afterwards, everyone wanted them to do what they thought MPRI had done in Croatia."

The Mijics see the lawsuit as a chance to regain a little of what they had lost.

"Everything we had was taken from us," said Branislav.

The Mijics lived comfortably as farmers in Yugoslavia, a nation cobbled together out of incompatible parts after World War I. Serbs and Croats, Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Muslims were thrown together, despite centuries of mutual antagonisms. When the country began to disintegrate during the early 1990s, it wasn't possible to separate the pieces neatly, and warring communities mutually committed atrocities.

The Mijic family lived in Krajina, a Serbian enclave inside what became Croatia, which the Croatians were determined to eliminate in 1995.

"Upwards of 180,000 Serbs would flee the province under duress, the worst single incident of ethnic cleansing in the entire sequence of Yugoslav wars," R. Craig Nation, a historian at the U.S. Army War College, wrote about Operation Storm in his study "War in the Balkans, 1992-2002."

The Mijics experienced the Croatian offensive as 13 days of terror on roads clogged with refugees fleeing to Serbia, with little food to eat and only rainwater to drink.

"Sometimes you could only go 20 feet," explained Branislav, who was 8 then but has vivid memories of the bloody journey. "When bombs fell on the column, dead horses and people and wrecked cars blocked the way."

The Croatian army, described in the lawsuit as "a rag-tag rifle-carrying infantry" was ill-equipped for the bombing task, said Anthony D'Amato, another attorney on the case.

The army previously had performed poorly during the wars that followed the collapse of the Yugoslav state, he said. The maneuver in Krajina required pinpoint targeting to avoid hitting Croatian villages and U.N. peacekeeper bases. Striking crowds of civilians on a road is no mean military feat. Where did the Croatians come by their newfound skill?

"They hired MPRI," said D'Amato, a Northwestern University law professor who has participated in a number of war-crimes lawsuits.

Such historical disputes often remain unresolved for decades, the relevant documents kept under seal in government archives. But as a private corporation, MPRI's files are subject to subpoena, and it did have a contract with the Croatian military in 1995.

Peter Galbraith, U.S. ambassador to Croatia at the time, acknowledged the contract's existence as a witness in the recent trial of Slobodan Milosevic at the Hague War Crimes Tribunal. Croatian leaders are currently on trial there, and testimony and previously unavailable documents produced at those trials makes the suit against MPRI possible.

For example, Slobodan Prajak, a Croatian military official currently on trial in the Hague, explained who was in charge of the operation by testifying: "…that's why we have the organization MPRI in Croatian army, with the top American generals whom we paid and who helped us to prepare Storm and Flash."

The notion that a U.S.-backed company would secretly orchestrate a successful Croat offensive in what at the time had been a Serbian-dominated conflict isn't far-fetched, given the military and diplomatic situation, D'Amato argued.

Richard Holbrooke, a U.S. assistant secretary of state, was looking for a formula to end the

fighting.

"As diplomats we could not expect the Serbs to be conciliatory at the negotiating table as long as they had experienced nothing but success on the battlefield," Holbrooke wrote in a memoir, "To End a War."

Whether MPRI was also hired to direct the Croatian offensive could be answered in a courtroom at the Dirksen U.S. Courthouse.

The Mijics and their attorneys are so far taking heart in the fact that a federal judge in a similar lawsuit filed against MPRI in Maryland — alleging that its personnel tortured detainees in Iraq while serving another U.S. contract during the mid-2000s — recently allowed that case to go forward. MPRI is appealing that ruling.

For the Mijics, the wait occurs amid the trappings of a new life, where a gigantic television set in their living room symbolizes their having made it to the American middle class.

But it was a difficult and long passage. They made it through the shelling to the relative safety of Serbia, only to be resettled later in Kosovo. There, they were caught up in the fighting between ethnic Albanians and government forces.

In 2000, the family arrived in the Chicago area, where Nedejko Mijic eventually opened a landscaping business.

In her simply furnished home, Zivka sometimes dreams of the happy times before Operation Storm. On other nights, her mind revisits the incoming shells and their perilous flight.

"You wake up too soon from the good dreams," she said.

http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-met-balkan-war-lawsuit-20100905,0,4744078,full.story