



ARKAN & MIE

CECA RAZNATOVIC,
POP STAR WIDOW OF
SERBIA'S INFAMOUS
WARLORD, TALKS MUSIC,
MYTH AND MURDER.
BY ADAM HIGGINBOTHAM

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Ceca photographed on the roof
of the heavily fortified Belgrade
mansion she shared with Arkan



War widow: (main picture) Ceca poses in front of one of the many First World War paintings by Serbian artists which her husband Arkan collected; and (right) his tomb. After he was assassinated, investigators found 38 bullets in his body



BEAUTY & THE BEAST

She was the biggest pop star in the Balkans, he was a bank robber, gangster, politician, paramilitary leader and war criminal. 'Ceca' Raznatovic tells **Adam Higginbotham** about living with Arkan. Photographs **Andrew Testa**

It's been nearly four years now, but the concierge at the Intercontinental Hotel doesn't need to think about it for a second. He remembers exactly where it happened and rattles out directions as if asked the way to a tiresome tourist attraction: 'Outside restaurant,' he says, in quick but fractured English. 'Seating place - second seating place on the left.'

And over there, across the spotlight marble, chrome and glass foyer of New Belgrade's flashiest hotel, on the cracked, aubergine-coloured leather banquette right outside the Rotisserie restaurant, is the very spot where they killed Arkan. Late in the afternoon of Saturday 15 January 2000, four men in tracksuits walked over to him and his bodyguards. One asked if they knew whether the hotel gym was open, and the others opened fire at close range with Heckler and Koch sub-machine guns.

Investigators later said that at least 38 bullets were fired: Arkan was hit three times in the face. One bullet entered through his mouth, another through the temple, the third through his left eye.

Ceca was shopping with her sister Lidija in the hotel boutique at the time. 'And when the shooting stopped,' she says, 'I ran out and saw what had happened...' Sitting at a coffee table in the office of FC Obilic, the football club she and Arkan bought together, Ceca reaches for another of her Cartier cigarettes, and hesitates. She is on the brink of tears. 'It's very difficult for me to talk about it... I'll never forget any of that day.' Her husband was still alive when she and Lidija carried him out to the car. But by the time they reached the Belgrade Emergency Centre at 6.50pm, it was too late: 'He died,' she says, 'in my arms.' ▶

◀ The murder seemed to mark the end of the unlikely story of Serbia's most famous glamour couple; of the five-year marriage between Svetlana 'Ceca' Raznatovic – the biggest pop star in the Balkans – and Zeljko 'Arkan' Raznatovic – bank robber, gangster, politician, paramilitary leader and indicted war criminal. For Ceca herself, however, there would be more to come. 'I'm only 30,' she will say eventually, 'but even in Hollywood you can't find a life-story like mine.'

Barely anyone in Western Europe has ever heard of Ceca. You can't buy her records in the shops and she's never been on tour – indeed, for a long time, she was forbidden from entering many countries in the European Union. But in Serbia, Svetlana Velickovic Raznatovic has been as famous as Madonna for much of the past 15 years. In that time, she rose from local to international celebrity in the Balkans, sold millions of records and became hugely wealthy. At the same time, the country she lives in was transformed from the most cosmopolitan and liberal state in Eastern Europe into a backward, bankrupt province – one which has become a byword for atrocity and corruption.

As Ceca shot to fame against the backdrop of war and genocide wrought by Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic, her life would provide captivating entertainment for the population of the unravelling nation. But by the time her husband died in her lap in the back of a car in Belgrade, she was much more than just a pop star with a curious taste in men: she had become the hood ornament of Milosevic's gangster-state machine. And when she was arrested earlier this year – in the company of Belgrade mobsters connected with the March assassination of reforming prime minister Zoran Djindjic – the rise and fall of Ceca Raznatovic had become emblematic of the forces of greed and anarchy that destroyed Yugoslavia.

'After Djindjic was killed, there was a lot of excitement about the organised crime arrests,' says sociologist Professor Eric Gordy, a Balkan expert who has followed Ceca's career since the outset. 'But what people were really excited about was Ceca being arrested, because it seemed to signify the end of an era.'

Ceca rarely gives interviews these days. Since her arrest, the Serbian media have turned against her; Arkan, once described routinely as a patriotic hero by the press, has now been recast as the perpetrator of atrocities. She was recently stung to learn that one British paper had described her as being Eva Braun to Arkan's Hitler. And when we finally meet, on a bleak, wet October afternoon in Belgrade – after weeks of negotiation and two cancelled appointments – she is friendly but nervous. She chain-smokes constantly and takes small sips from a tall glass of lager – 'I love Heineken,' she says. She wears leather trousers and stiletto boots, and a diaphanous white blouse designed to showcase her expensive cleavage to maximum effect. Every piece of jewellery she wears – the heart-shaped necklace, the giant hoop earrings, the watch, the enormous hemispherical ring – is studded with diamonds. But she looks quite unlike the hard-faced, orange-tinted marvel of contemporary

plastic surgery depicted in photographs: in person, Ceca is quite beautiful.

She says she doesn't speak English; she was only taught Russian at school; and although she's learning English now, she can best express herself in Serbian. We have to speak through a translator, 'so,' she tells me, 'follow my reactions closely'. But sometimes she answers a question before the translation is complete, and every now and then, when she wants to make a point, she will slip briefly into crisp English, look me straight in the eye and deliver an emphatic 'Yes' or 'No'. Ceca is full of convenient excuses and vaporous denials. When, for example, I ask if Arkan ever talked to her about the crimes he was accused of, she simply says, 'No'. But in a country where criminality and corruption are so endemic that one cabinet minister says he fears Serbia is becoming 'the Colombia of Europe', the truth can be an elusive concept.

In conversation, she likes to characterise herself as a tragic icon of Serbian womanhood – a God-fearing Christian who loves her children above all else, struggling bravely against injustice. 'I am fragile and emotional,' she tells me. And, 'What doesn't kill me makes me stronger'. I ask Ceca what people in Serbia think of her now. 'That I'm a victim,' she says. 'A victim of my name and my huge popularity, and of my great love... that I was married to Zeljko. I'm not a criminal. I'm not a Mafioso. I'm just a woman who's fighting her way through life.'

Svetlana Velickovic always wanted to be famous: 'Singing, or modelling... or perhaps as an actress.' She grew up in Zitoradje, a small town in southern Serbia, near the Romanian border. She remembers two things about the bedroom she had as a child: that it was filled with dolls, and that it contained an enormous mirror. 'I adored it. I loved spending hours and hours in front of it. Nobody could tear me away. I kept telling my mother, "I'm going to be a big star one day."'

She has been singing in public since she was five. At the age of 10, she began appearing live as a guest of established Yugoslavian folk singers. She played up and down the country, to the almost exclusively male audiences of the *kafana*, the slightly seedy bar-restaurants at the heart of every Balkan town and village, where men gather to eat, drink and sing late into the night. She toured the Balkans and played for the expatriate communities of Yugoslav 'guest workers' in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

In 1987, she recorded her first album. Like all her material before and since, it dwelt on sentimental and dramatic love stories for Yugoslavia's rural masses: for farmers, lorry drivers and housewives: 'If I was American,' she says, 'I would definitely be singing country music. It's the same as Serbian folk: it speaks to people.'

At 14, she had a perky, girl-next-door image, and her first hit: with the song 'Cvetak Zanovetak' – 'the Nagging Flower'. It was a mildly suggestive song with risqué words, which played on Ceca's latent sexuality: 'Until I was 16,' she says now, 'I didn't understand what I was singing about.' It made her a star overnight. By the beginning of



the Nineties, Ceca was one of the biggest names in Yugoslavia. Meanwhile, her future husband was about to get his big break – in 1991, war broke out in Croatia.

Like much of the recent history of Serbia, the life of Zeljko 'Arkan' Raznatovic seems to test the limits of credibility, and is shot through with myth, rumour and deliberate distortion. But there is a version of the story that has become recognised as true, if only through repetition. Some parts of it – especially the most horrifying chapters – are even supported by hard evidence.

Born in 1952, Zeljko was the son of a Yugoslav air force colonel, and apparently graduated from catering and hotel management college in Belgrade. But he had been a petty criminal since the age of 14 – snatching purses in Belgrade's Kalemegdan Park – and in 1969 he was arrested for the first time and sentenced to three years in a juvenile prison. In an attempt to straighten him out, it's said his desperate father appealed to contacts in the Yugoslav State Security Service – the UDBA – to find a suitable outlet for his talents.

'I FELL IN LOVE WITH HIM INSTANTLY. I RESPECT FIGHTERS, PEOPLE WHO DON'T GIVE UP...'

◀ questions any sort of success too much. And Ceca created the image of the modest-but-reckless girl from the village, who hit the big city looking for a better life, and took chances to achieve her dreams.'

Arkan and Ceca were married on 19 February 1995. 'My parents are very proud, because I am going to marry the bravest man in the country,' she said. It was the most spectacular wedding Serbia had ever seen. The event began before dawn, with a convoy of 40 SUVs driving the 300km from Belgrade to Zitoradje, where Arkan was to claim Ceca as his bride by shooting an apple off the roof of her parents' house and, in a touch not drawn from any tradition more authentic than Cinderella, the best man fitted the bride with a golden stiletto. For the ceremony, Arkan wore a vintage First World War Serbian officer's uniform; Ceca wore a dress inspired by *Gone with the Wind*. The event finished seven costume changes later – three for him, four for her – with a party at the Intercontinental Hotel.

The Milosevic regime embraced the event with gusto: the wedding was broadcast live on state television and made the front page of the government-backed newspaper. Ceca and Arkan were perfect for one another – she brought him added glamour and celebrity; he brought her the money and strong-arm influence that placed her beyond the reach of her closest turbo-folk competitors. 'Arkan bought the best songs and video clips money could buy,' says Ambrosovic. 'She was simply untouchable.' The marriage was the high point of a personality cult that made the couple aspirational role models throughout the country. 'The relationship between Arkan and Ceca,' wrote one magazine at the time, 'is more than just an ordinary love affair between two mortals.' When a two-hour video of the wedding, *Ceca and Arkan*, was released, it sold 100,000 copies, a record in Serbia.

The end of 1995 brought the signing of the Dayton Accords and the end of the fighting in Bosnia, officially putting Arkan's Tigers out of business. But the war had made him one of the richest men in Serbia. He abandoned his military fatigues for Italian suit, and began to legitimise himself. In addition to the plush casino at the Hotel Yugoslavia and his chain of Serb Crown bakeries, he invested in boutiques, property development, oilfields, a radio station, and began planning to build Belgrade's biggest business centre. And he finally managed to get his own football club. When overtures to his beloved Red Star were rebuffed, Arkan settled for buying FC Obilic, an old amateur club languishing in the third division.

As chairman, he quickly introduced new management techniques. Promising players were bought up from smaller, provincial sides; rival managers who didn't want to let their players go were persuaded otherwise. Another prominent gangster-turned-football-manager was shot dead after refusing to sell a player to Arkan; the player himself was thrown into the boot of a car and driven to Obilic, where he sensibly agreed to sign a contract. The matches themselves were scarcely more sportsmanlike: opposition players would receive threatening phone calls the night before key games, and Arkan was known to simply walk

into opponents' dressing rooms on the day of the match and inform the team that they should lose – or face the consequences. One way or another, FC Obilic suddenly became a very successful side: by 1998, they were Yugoslavian league champions and playing in the UEFA Champions' League.

But the most popular couple in Serbia was still dogged by the past. One story told has them appearing on a TV Pink chat show, when a female viewer called in to compliment Ceca on her beautiful gold and diamond necklace – and accurately described an inscription on it. The host of the show asked how she could possibly know what was written on Ceca's jewellery. 'Because Arkan stole it from me in Bijeljina,' said the caller.

In September 1999 a sealed indictment to bring Arkan to trial on war crimes charges was finally made public; it made it impossible for him to travel in Europe, and UEFA made apparent their displeasure at having a man accused of mass murder at the head of a Champions' League club. Ceca took over as chairman of FC Obilic shortly afterward. At the time of his assassination, Arkan was Serbia's most well-connected and damaging potential witness against Slobodan Milosevic.

For a year after her husband's death, Ceca says she barely left the house; she wore black and mourned. But in June 2001, she staged a huge 'comeback' concert for 70,000 fans – almost all of them the teenage girls who had grown up on her music – at the Red Star Belgrade stadium. It had always been Arkan's dream to see her play there: 'I was thinking of never going back to singing again, but I knew he would have insisted. That's why I dedicated the concert to him.'

At eight o'clock in the morning on 17 March this year, the Serbian police arrived on Ceca's doorstep. Four police vans sealed off the street and 100 paramilitary police began an eight-hour search of the house. Ceca was alleged to have been associating with and harbouring Milorad 'Legija' Lukovic and Dusan 'Siptar' Spasojevic, the principal figures in the notorious Belgrade mafia outfit known as the Zemun Clan, who were widely believed to have organised the assassination of prime minister Zoran Djindjic five days earlier.

Legija, a heavily tattooed former member of the French Foreign Legion – his nickname means 'Legionnaire' – is one of the most dangerous men in Serbia. He was at the heart of the gangster state run by Slobodan Milosevic, and a long-time friend of Arkan – first as his deputy in the Tigers, and, later, as commanding officer of the ruthless paramilitary force known as the Red Berets.

Formed by Serbian State Security, the Red Berets were ostensibly an 'anti-terrorist' Special Operations Unit. But they fought in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo and became domestic enforcers for the Milosevic regime – beating and threatening political opponents and becoming feared as a government death squad. In later years, members of the Red Berets were recruited directly

Marriage mania: (below) a video of Arkan and Ceca's wedding sold more than 100,000 copies – a record in Serbia; and (right) 70,000 fans queue for Ceca's comeback concert in Belgrade in June 2002



from Serbian

prisons; like Arkan and his

Tigers, they – and Legija – were murderers and gangsters, but at the same time officially endorsed and uniformed agents of the state.

The Red Berets' lack of intervention on Milosevic's side was crucial to the successful overthrow of his government in 2000. In return for this, it's said, Legija expected Zoran Djindjic's new regime to let him and his friends in the Zemun Clan continue to act outside the law – maintaining friendly relations with senior judicial officials and government ministers while killing with impunity. So when Djindjic began a clampdown on organised crime, Legija and Siptar decided he had to go. The successful assassination in March was the fifth attempt on the prime minister's life they had organised in six months.

When Djindjic was shot, the government immediately declared a state of emergency and launched Operation Sabre, a sweeping police action against organised crime and those connected to the assassination. They would eventually arrest 10,000 people, testing Serbia's legal apparatus to breaking point and horrifying international monitors such as Human Rights Watch. Those taken into custody included supreme court judges, police officers, the country's own state prosecutor, the former head of state security, his deputy and secret service chiefs.

The search of Ceca's house brought results. In the basement, police came upon a locked, armoured door. Ceca had no keys to it, so they had to break it down. Behind it, they found 21 firearms, three boxes of ammunition, telescopic sniper sights, sub-machine-gun silencers, gas masks, police batons and a selection of number plates registered to cars owned by the Zemun Clan.

At four that afternoon, with the search concluded, the officer in charge of the operation, Dragan Karleusa, finally arrived at the house. Karleusa



Military manoeuvres: (left) Arkan in full military fatigues on operations near Kasic in Croatia in January 1993; and (below) Ceca, queen of 'turbo folk', performs at a concert a year after her husband's death at Belgrade's Red Star stadium. It had always been Arkan's wish that she perform there

opponents of Marshal Tito's regime at large in Europe. He was said to have passports in three different nationalities and 40 aliases – including the name by which he was to become known. For the newly christened Arkan, it was the beginning of a long and profitable relationship with the authorities in Belgrade.

In 1986, Arkan went home and opened a renowned patisserie and ice-cream parlour near the Red Star Belgrade football ground. He built a house directly opposite the stadium. He was made head of the Red Star Supporters' Club – with the tacit collusion of state and club officials, who wanted him to rein in fans that had begun to provide a focus for anti-communist, anti-government agitation. And, finally, on 11 October 1990, with the state of Yugoslavia beginning its long disintegration, Arkan officially incorporated his own paramilitary force: the Serbian Volunteer Guard – known as Arkan's Tigers. The core of his private army was drawn from the Red Star terraces: 'We trained fans without weapons. I insisted on discipline from the very beginning. You know our fans – they're noisy, they like to drink, to joke about. I stopped all that in one go. I made them cut their hair, shave regularly, not drink. And so it began,' he said, 'the way it should be.'

When fighting broke out in eastern Slovenia, Arkan and his 1,000-strong football hooligan army – equipped and controlled directly by the Serbian interior ministry – became shock troops of ethnic cleansing. The Tigers murdered under the banner of Serbian nationalism, but were motivated by the dynamics of organised crime – looting front-line areas and stealing whatever they could lay their hands on, while Arkan took control of local sanctions busting, petrol smuggling and war profiteering rackets. They were there at Vukovar in 1991, linked by the Hague war crimes tribunal to the Vukovar hospital massacre, in which hundreds of mainly Croat patients were bussed to a deserted field and summarily executed.

They were there again at the outset of the Bosnian war at Bijeljina in 1992, killing or running the terrified Muslim population out of town and looting their homes. The things they did there would make Arkan and his men infamous throughout the world. That same year, Arkan was elected to parliament; in 1993, he founded his own political party. And on 11 October 1993, at the Tigers' training camp in Erdut, at a celebration to mark the paramilitaries' third anniversary, Ceca and Arkan met for the first time.

'He was very cute, very handsome and very masculine,' says Ceca. 'I fell in love with him instantly. I respect people who are fighters, who succeed in life, who don't give up – because life is a constant struggle.'

Did she ever find it difficult being married to such a controversial figure, someone regarded across Europe as a war criminal?

'To me, what my people thought about it was the important thing. And we were the most popular couple in Serbia – in his own country, he had a reputation as a great patriot. And to me, he was a great husband. He had two children with me, and from a previous marriage he had had seven. And he was

very much drawn to women, and always protective toward them. He was a great, great gentleman. And I'll never love anyone like I loved him.'

Does she think she'll marry again?

'Hardly,' she whispers.

In Serbia, the war changed many things beyond recognition. Pop music was one of them. During the Eighties, Yugoslavia had been renowned for its vibrant countercultural rock scene. But with the war came music custom-built for a profiteering regime peddling ersatz nationalism to an isolated populace: 'turbo-folk', a brash, plastic mix of traditional folk and modern electro-pop beats. It became the house style of expensive new venues in New Belgrade, such as the Folkoteka, and the sound of the trashy new Milosevic-sponsored television stations – TV Pink and TV Palma – which broadcast turbo-folk videos almost to the exclusion of all other music.

Serbia was being brought to its knees by hyperinflation – peaking, in 1994, at more than 313 million per cent. It eradicated the middle class and sent practically everyone reeling into grinding poverty. But turbo-folk celebrated the trappings of the new wealth – in the words of Dragan Ambrosovic, music writer for Belgrade's *Vreme* magazine, it was 'the money without origin'.

This was music for the new social elite created by the war: the gangsters who, in collusion with the government, were becoming wealthy from smuggling and racketeering. The videos of artists such as Snezana Babic – Sneki – and Dragana Mirkovic were filled with gold jewellery, luxury cars and huge new houses; they depicted young women in knock-off Versace living it up in the mirrored bars and casinos of Belgrade's luxury hotels – the Intercontinental, the Hyatt and the Metropolitan. One famous turbo-folk lyric of the time runs: 'Coca-Cola, Marlboro, Suzuki/Discotheques, guitars and bouzouki/That's life, that's not an ad/Nobody has it better than us'.

As gangsters took over Belgrade, turbo-folk became the soundtrack to the underworld – the music of choice for the shaven-headed young men known as the *dizelasi*, because of their fondness for Diesel clothes and the fuel smuggling from which they made their money. 'Turbo folk,' said Petar Popovic, director of the country's state-run record company in 1994, 'is the sound of the war and everything that the war brought to this country. It represents everything that has happened to this country over the past few years.'

And of all the turbo-folk stars, Ceca was the greatest. By 1992, the bubble-permed, folk-singing girl-next-door had been transformed into a smoky-eyed vixen in micro-minis and dresses slashed to the hip. TV made her a star: her videos were the flashiest and most expensive in the genre, and looked just like those on MTV.

She embarked on a scandalous private life to match. In 1991 she eloped to Switzerland with a Muslim restaurateur, and later hooked up with Dejan 'Saban' Majanovic, a minor Belgrade gangster. The beleaguered Serbian public loved it all. 'In a country where the majority of the people are on the edge of poverty,' says Ambrosovic, 'no one ▶

Yet the next time he re-emerged, it was in Western Europe: as a career criminal with an uncanny ability for prison escapes. Throughout the Seventies, he crisscrossed the continent, holding up banks in Holland, Belgium, Germany, Sweden and Italy. Fellow gangster Goran Vukovic once infamously observed: 'Of all of us, Arkan robbed the most banks; he walked into them like they were self-service stores... as far as robbery is concerned, he was really unsurpassed.'

Nevertheless, Zeljko kept getting caught. The Belgians got him in 1974, and the following year sentenced him to 15 years in jail. He escaped three years and eight months into his sentence. In late 1979, he was arrested in Holland for his part in three armed robberies, and sentenced to seven years. But he escaped again, less than two years later. In 1981, he was wounded and apprehended during the course of a raid in Frankfurt. The Germans put him in the prison hospital; he got away again. At one point, he is also said to have rescued an accomplice from a Swedish courtroom by bursting in armed with two pistols, and tossing one to his friend in the dock while threatening the judge with the other.

This remarkable series of break-outs was almost certainly facilitated by Zeljko's friends in the UDBA, for whom, it seems, he had worked since leaving Yugoslavia. In return for their help in underwriting his criminal career, Zeljko had become a UDBA hitman, assassinating emigre



is a senior interior ministry official who has led several anti-corruption operations in Serbia. His daughter, Jelena Karleusa, also happens to be another prominent and pneumatic turbo-folk star: Ceca's principal rival.

'She's not my rival,' says Ceca, diplomatically, when I mention this. 'That's not how I see it.'

But did it seem strange that it was him, because he's the father of –

She cuts me off: 'No, no,' she says, and laughs lightly. Strange things like that happen all the time here: 'This is Serbia,' she explains. 'He was just doing his job.'

Ceca says she was not arrested, but asked to go to the police station, 'To give a statement for half an hour, because they had found 11 of Zeljko's pistols. And then I stayed for four months.'

She was taken to Belgrade's central prison – a forbidding concrete building directly opposite the FC Obilic ground – and placed in solitary confinement. That night, news programmes in Serbia broadcast secretly taped video of Ceca chatting amiably with Legija in a Belgrade restaurant. TV and radio stations promptly stopped playing her music.

So, where did the guns and equipment in the house come from? 'Zeljko had his own army: he was the commander of the Serbian Voluntary Guard. I didn't share a house with a music teacher – if I had they would have found manuscripts or conductor's batons.' And all that equipment? 'They were all presents given to Zeljko, by the president, the interior ministers, his friends. He loved

'TURBO FOLK IS THE SOUND OF THE WAR AND EVERYTHING IT BROUGHT TO THIS COUNTRY'

firearms, but I didn't know those weapons were in the house.'

So the sniper scopes were just part of an arms collection? 'I don't know where they found those. I didn't actually see the search being done. I live in a big house. And it was all useless – they had experts determine what was usable and what wasn't. They found them in a cellar, and I've never been down there. I've never even had keys for that room.'

Is it true she continued to spend time with Legija and Siptar? 'Legija was the best man at our wedding – what else would I do? And, for a long time, he worked for the secret service. He was a colonel, a commander of the Special Operations Unit.'

But she denies the accusation that she associated with people who were wanted in connection with Djindjic's murder. 'That's rubbish,' she says. And what does "associating with someone" mean? I haven't seen him for six months – although we live in the same city. And these other people, I knew them – but to associate with someone means to go out with them to dinners or to parties, to all sorts of places. But it wasn't like that: I was acquainted with them. They were very nice to me. When Ceca does it, it's scandalous, but senior state officials' associated with them, too: going to dinners and parties. And nothing happens to them.'

Ceca refuses to denounce or disown any of her friends. 'I'm not a coward. These friendships have lasted for more than 10 years. They didn't start yesterday. Do you understand me? They're not recent friendships – where I made a mistake'

What kind of people are they?

'I wouldn't really like to talk about it. I think there are people more competent than me to talk about these things.' She laughs. 'I can't say anything bad about them... I'm so sorry that all these things have happened. I was a great friend with Zoran Djindjic and his family. So many families are suffering because of what's happened. I'm reluctant to talk about it. I'd like to put it behind me, and to protect my family from all the labels that were attached to me. And I wouldn't want to say something that might be misinterpreted.'

The house that Zeljko Raznatovic built is a legendary landmark in Belgrade – it's one of the most famous of the kitsch fortresses that went up in the glory days of the city's criminal elite: the 'turbo-houses'. It's hard to miss, even at night – four storeys of floodlit pastel yellow-painted neo-classicism and mirrored windows looming out of the darkness beside a busy main road. Next door is the Mexican embassy; up the hill lies Dedinje, the exclusive residential suburb of Belgrade where Slobodan Milosevic lived throughout his time as president. Directly across the street are gates four, five and six of the Red Star Belgrade football stadium.

Ceca's home is clearly designed to keep people out. Where the front door should be, there is a smoked plate-glass shop front hung with Venetian blinds: it looks like a cafe, or a minicab office that recently went out of business. Sightseeing is discouraged: the three of us – me, the photographer and our interpreter – spend only a few minutes dawdling around the building, staring up at it from the pavement, before three scruffy, thick-set men

with shaved heads appear. They eye us menacingly, and follow us, until it seems prudent for the interpreter to explain that we are early for our second appointment with Ceca.

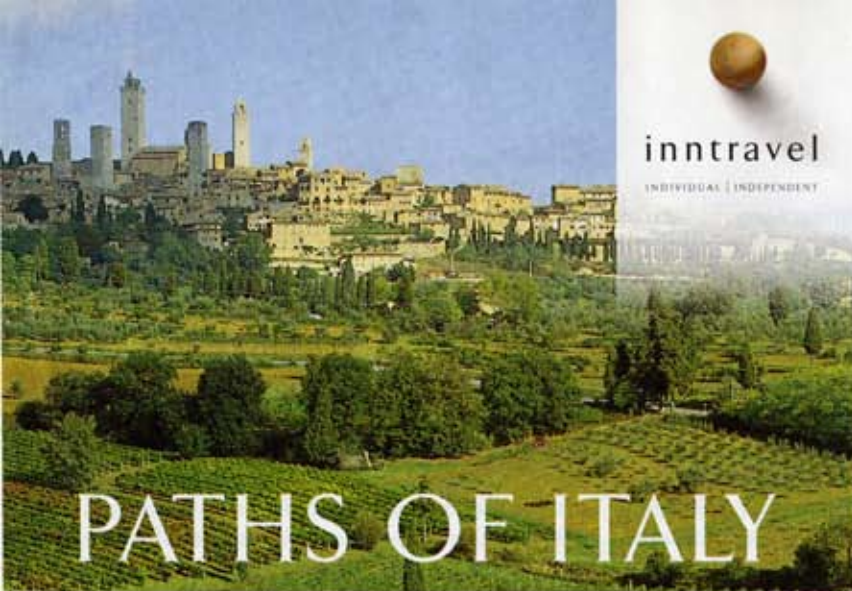
We are summoned into the cafe with a click of the fingers, and motioned to a table decorated with the Red Star Belgrade official calendar for 2003. There is a threatening silence. The bodyguards glower at a television set in the corner and say nothing. The room is dimly lit, filled with discarded pieces of odd furniture and hung with pictures of Arkan and Ceca – Arkan with a model of a football stadium; Arkan dressed in combat fatigues; Ceca standing astride the globe, microphone in hand; the two of them on their wedding day. There is only one picture in the room that doesn't feature either Ceca or her husband. Up in one darkened corner is a framed colour photograph of a man who looks very familiar. I ask the translator who it is. He looks up at the picture, and then hurriedly glances back at the floor. 'I'll tell you,' he hisses, 'later.' It is Radovan Karadzic, president of the breakaway Bosnian Serb Republic, indicted by the Hague war crimes tribunal in 1995 for crimes against humanity, genocide, murder, plunder and violation of the laws or customs of war. He is officially recognised as one of the most wanted men on earth.

Upstairs, Ceca herself is an enthusiastic hostess: more relaxed than before, she is warm and solicitous. She greets us at the door with her two children, seven-year-old Vjeko and five-year-old Anastasia. She invites us into the living room, and is not happy until I've agreed to accept a glass of whisky. 'Because you're here in my house,' she says brightly, 'it means you're welcome here as friends.'

The house is gaudy and sprawling: the drawing-room, with its artificial waterfall; the swimming-pool in the basement, with its mosaics and the plastic palm trees Ceca had specially imported from Holland; upstairs, through a series of doors riveted and upholstered in leather, is a games room and the guest rooms. She takes me up to the turret at the top of the building, with its panoramic aspects of Belgrade and which afforded – until they built a roof over the stadium – a perfect view of the Red Star Belgrade pitch. Along the way, she points out Zeljko's extensive collection of paintings by Serbian artists. Almost every one is a tableau of defeat and disaster from the First World War. Outside the children's playroom is one depicting a man being blindfolded for execution; near the games room another shows a skeleton in a tattered uniform stretched out in a desolate landscape, a bayonet half-buried in the mud nearby; birds wheel overhead. 'They're all scenes from World War One,' she says, when I ask what this represents. 'I wouldn't know what it is.'

Eventually, she leads me out on to a balcony, where we stand, buffeted by a freezing wind. Below, traffic speeds past in the night. 'Zeljko and I always wanted to be in the house whenever we could, to be with the family,' Ceca says. 'Many people believe that Zeljko's house is a huge castle. But it's not – it's a family house.'

They say, I tell her, that Arkan built four storeys of the house above the ground, and three below it: levels of secret bunkers in case of attack. 'It's a lie, ▶



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'I'M ONLY 30, BUT EVEN IN HOLLYWOOD YOU CAN'T FIND A STORY LIKE MINE'

◀ a lie. I'm showing you everything. There are a lot of misconceptions about some things – and exaggerations published by the media. This is everything there is, so you can see the truth for yourself. This is everything,' she says, 'when it comes to the real Arkan.'

When we sit down to talk again, she sends the children away. Vjeko, she says, is suspicious, and wants to listen in. While she was in prison, she sent them off to stay with her parents – who told them their mother had gone on tour in the United States. When she was finally released, her children begged her not to go to America again: 'Because they don't have phones there.' She still hasn't told them what really happened.

In the end, Ceca spent a total of 121 days in prison – 30 of them in solitary confinement and 10 of them on the hunger strike she began after her sister Lidija was arrested in May. Ceca was released in July. All allegations relating to the assassination of Zoran Djindjic were dropped, but others remain. She has been charged with the unlicensed possession of 11 handguns, and – rather more seriously – with embezzling more than £8.1m from the transfers of 15 players from FC Obilic to football clubs around Europe. This she dismisses with the explanation that stealing from Obilic would be like burgling her own house: 'It's impossible... that I've stolen from something I made together with Zeljko, with my own money. We invested our own personal money in the club.'

These days, nobody plays Ceca's records on the radio any more; and TV Pink and TV Palma have stopped showing her videos. At the end of March, Siptar was cornered by Serbian police and shot dead; Legija is still on the run.

In spite of the events of the past year, Ceca says she isn't afraid for her personal safety; she insists that everything that's happened has made her even more popular.

'People love me,' she says. 'They tell me when I go out – they come up to me on the street and want to kiss and hug me.' But these days, she rarely leaves the house. 'I live far from the limelight,' she says. 'I'm used to it now.'

What she likes best is to lie on the sofa, surf channels on the TV and

chat on the phone. She's working on a new album, and maybe, later in the year, she'll play another big concert: 'Because that's what my audience – my fans – want of me.'

However she isn't interested in becoming famous outside the Balkans. 'To make a European career, I'd have to devote myself to it 100 per cent. And I can't do that, because I've got small children – and they're the most important thing to me.' And Ceca certainly doesn't want to have anything more to do with politics: 'Politics – I despise it. I think politics, throughout the Balkans, made everyone's life hell. Nations have fallen apart because of politics – demented politics. And I don't think anybody in their right mind,' she says, 'could prefer that kind of situation to peace.'

As we prepare to leave, Ceca asks why none of us has touched the cake – a long sponge roll, carefully cut and laid out on the coffee table in front of us. It has sweet cream filling, and a banana running through the middle of it: the kind of thing you might bake for a children's birthday party. Ceca made it herself. 'I'm from the south, where all the women are very good cooks – especially when it comes to cake. On the street,' she says, 'I'm a star. But at home, I am a housewife.'

And before we go, Ceca shares one more thing with me: it's about the 11 guns. Two of them, she says, are hers: they're legal and licensed. Target shooting is something of a hobby. Her father taught her how to use a rifle when she was 15. 'I am,' she says, 'an excellent shot.'

To illustrate her point, she tells me a story about visiting a shooting range with her husband, early on in their marriage. Zeljko asked the pistol trainer there to go easy on her – he suggested her target be brought up close, only 15ft away, 'so,' he said to the trainer, 'she doesn't embarrass me.' Ceca asked for one at 30 metres, the same distance away as her husband's. Ceca emptied her pistol down the range.

Zeljko looked from the precisely drilled target to his wife and immediately made a promise. 'I'll never cheat on you with another woman,' he told her. 'I'll be faithful to you until the day I die.'

'So you see,' says Svetlana Raznatovic, granting me a dark smile, 'even Arkan was afraid of someone.' **OM**