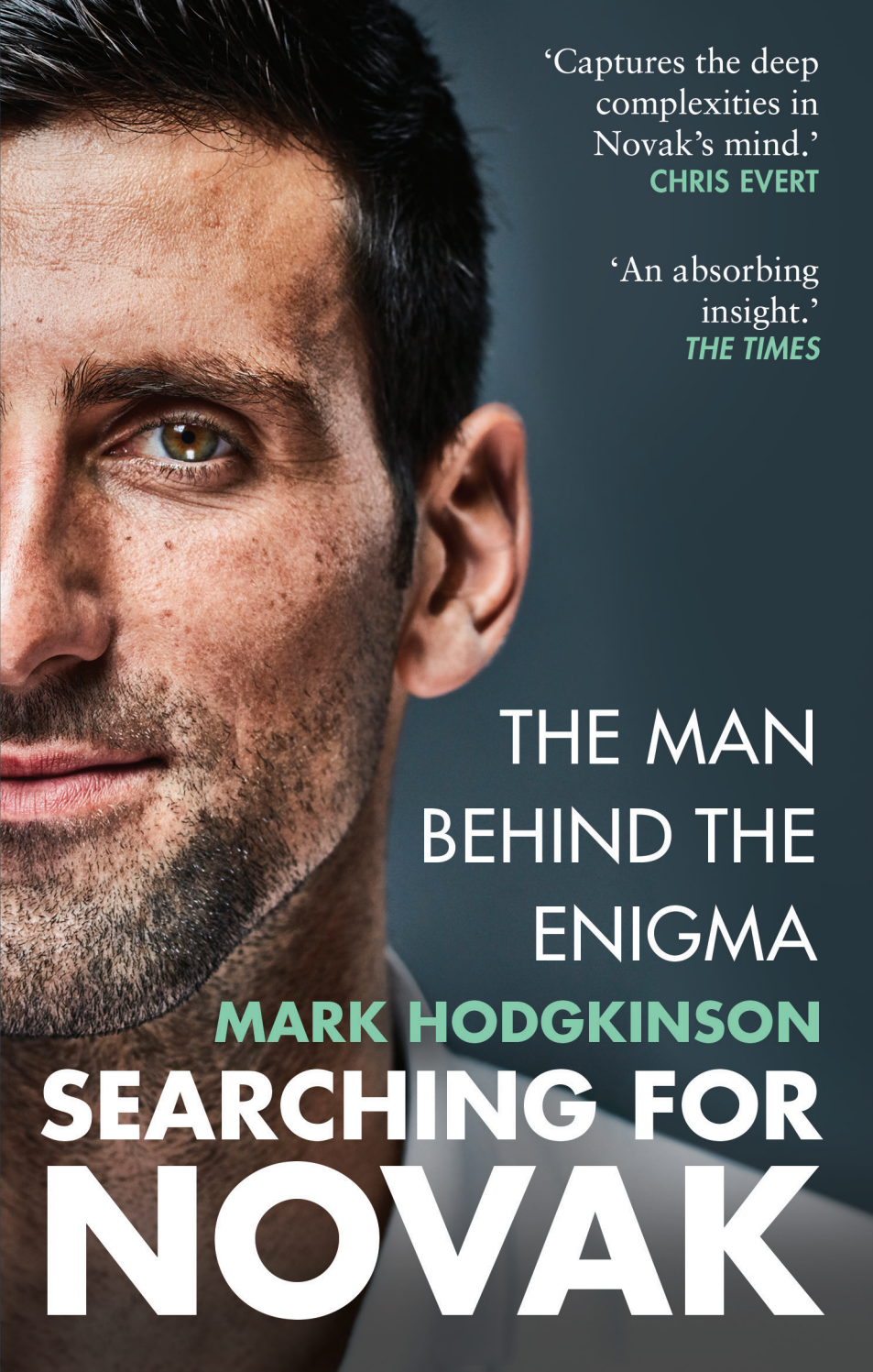

'Captures the deep complexities in Novak's mind.'
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'An absorbing insight.'
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THE MAN BEHIND THE ENIGMA
MARK HODGKINSON
SEARCHING FOR NOVAK

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'A fascinating insight into the greatest tennis player of all time . . . Offers an expert understanding of how Djokovic thinks on and off the court.'
Matt Majendie, Sports correspondent, *The Standard*

'*Searching for Novak* may give you a reason to give the GOAT another chance before he waves goodbye.'
Steve Tignor, Tennis.com

SEARCHING FOR NOVAK

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THE MAN BEHIND THE ENIGMA

MARK HODGKINSON

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In memory of Mum.

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INTRODUCTION

It's not subtle, but no one ever booked a table at the Novak Restaurant expecting – or wanting – subtle. In an endless, glorious loop of tennis nostalgia – Novak-stalgia, if you must – wall-mounted televisions with the sound turned down low forever replay old matches, including his best bits from down the years. Novak Djokovic has, of course, recommended that you don't watch TV while eating as that can expose your food to bad emotions, but he has made an exception for his own restaurant in Belgrade: there are only good vibes here.

Walking in, you pass the Djokovic water feature and, at the top of the stairs, you're welcomed first by an outsize, terracotta warrior-style statue of the tennis player – impassive and somehow also knowing and unflappable – and then, secondly, by the maître d'. Much here is on a mega scale – because why not? – with gigantic glass cabinets showcasing some of Djokovic's trophies. On the way to your table, you're drawn to a framed motivational quote – 'Make it Happen' – surrounded by lit candles, giving those words the look of a piece of religious scripture. There's also what appears to be a metal, three-dimensional sculpture of his logo. Almost every bit of wall space that isn't taken up with televisions is filled with photographs of Djokovic hitting tennis balls and hoisting trophies.

A pillar is filled with hundreds of old tennis balls, perhaps even ones he once hit – almost as if all the toil and sweat from the practice

court is propping this restaurant up. There's even a bright, almost psychedelic piece of artwork of Djokovic as a small child swinging a racquet, a reminder of how this all began. Just in case you haven't realized it yet, you're lost in Novak Djokovic's world (where gluten-free options are available).

If you've just landed in Belgrade and you're searching for Djokovic – if you're looking for a greater understanding of who he is and how he thinks – the Novak Restaurant is about as good a place as any to start. Fresh off the plane, you're psychoanalysing a menu decorated with tennis balls. What does success taste like? That's the question this restaurant is trying to answer. But, sitting here, eating your mushroom risotto, your tomato side salad and your Novak Tart and surrounded by the still and moving images of the player, you do start to wonder: who is getting into whose head here? It's hard to think of another restaurant anywhere in the world that celebrates a public figure in this full-spectrum, multi-media way; harder still to bring to mind a restaurant like this which is owned by the star athlete and their family. None of this is meant to sound snide or snarky. It's a fun, joyous space, the food's good, and if you're ever in Belgrade, you should go. The Novak Restaurant's also – in a good way – quite overwhelming. It's much more – so much more – than you had possibly imagined. But that's also true of almost every element of Djokovic's story.

Djokovic is the most successful tennis player in history. He's the GOAT, the Greatest of All Time. That's interesting in itself. Even more compelling is the way he has achieved that greatness: the bombs and the hardships in his backstory and his more recent experiences in a Melbourne 'prison', plus all the other psychological struggles that come

with trying to win big. Plus, Djokovic is the most curious, unconventional and progressive of tennis players. Yes, Djokovic can slide and do the splits with more flexibility and panache than anyone else in tennis. There's also no more accomplished returner of serve, thanks, in part to the Beatles' back catalogue (more on that later). And yet the most fascinating thing about him isn't how he moves or how he strikes the ball, but how he thinks. He has the most original mind in tennis, perhaps across all sports.

Maybe you already love Djokovic. You're part of the #NoleFam. Or you're not, but you're intrigued by him all the same. Whatever your starting point, if you want to truly appreciate and understand modern tennis – and all its psychodrama – you're going to need to poke around in Djokovic's head. Searching for Novak means journeying, as deep as you can, inside his psyche.

1

GOLDEN CHILD

Going deep inside Novak Djokovic's basement bomb shelter – into the space where he spent many nights during the NATO bombings in 1999 – is to feel as though you're dipping yourself in Yugoslav concrete. Low concrete ceilings. Concrete walls, blotted with damp, that seem as though they're crowding in on you. Concrete floors. The air – and there isn't too much of that down here – even smells faintly of concrete. People talk about the Belgrade greyscape, and about the concrete overload in some parts of the city. But nothing quite prepares you for the greyness and the starkness of this bunker beneath a Brutalist apartment block in the Banjica neighbourhood, a few miles south of downtown Belgrade.

It's not just the concrete, all cold, rough and unforgiving, that unsettles you. It's imagining how Djokovic and others would have felt inside this bunker; there's a sense that this is somehow still a place of fear and confusion and gathering rage, almost as if the concrete all around you absorbed some of those emotions and now it's radiating them back at you.

For Djokovic, who was 11 years old when NATO planes started pounding Serbia, this is where he felt fear and horror, where he was 'disturbed emotionally', not knowing what the next moment would bring for him, his two younger brothers Marko and Djordje and his parents Srdjan and Dijana. This was the safest spot around, originally built as an atomic shelter in case of nuclear war. To get into the heart of the bunker, you must pass through a metal door the colour of freshly oxygenated blood, head down concrete steps and then open up two steel doors, the heftiest of which must be 30cm (12in) thick, like something you might imagine in a bank vault or a submarine. Residents would close and seal those doors behind them, spinning the giant locks, to protect themselves from any explosions or fires.

But even inside here, supposedly bomb-proof and fire-proof, they understood that nowhere could be completely safe, that even an atomic bunker couldn't save you from a direct hit. In the near-darkness, Djokovic would stare at his mother's face to understand how he should be feeling – if she looked scared, and she mostly did, then he knew he should be terrified too.

Hidden away, immortalized in concrete, the basement is still pretty much as it was in the 1990s, as close as you're going to get to a time capsule taking you back to when Djokovic was a scared, confused child, amid so many other frightened and disorientated children, and adults too. Back to when he would listen to the low-flying jets, which sounded as though they were ripping holes in the Belgrade night sky, and then to the devastating, endless thunder of the bombs and the rockets (while muffled by the concrete, that didn't reduce the fear that the bunker's inhabitants felt during those long, terrible nights).

On some level, and maybe you have to physically be here too to fully make sense of this, stepping inside this bunker almost feels as though you're also going inside and reaching some part of Djokovic's mind. It's a series of small rooms and darkened corners and, as you walk around and kung-fu the cobwebs, you appreciate that this isn't somewhere that Djokovic's old neighbours, and any new residents, like to revisit too often. Just a handful of times, Djokovic has gone back to remind himself exactly what the bunker looks like; what he won't forget is the intensity of the emotions, and how he felt when he was inside.

Old armchairs and some wicker seats are scattered around; this is possibly the same furniture that would have been there in 1999. The rubbish on the tables and the floor could also be vintage, a quarter of a century old. Light fittings dangle from the ceilings, bare and without lamps, and emitting a weak, chemical-yellow glow that barely punches through the darkness. One difference between now and then, according to a neighbour who had found a key and unlocked the basement, was that they would have had mattresses on the floor in 1999. That is where Djokovic shivered under a blanket as Belgrade achieved an unwelcome first: the first European capital to come under NATO bombardment, which was designed to force the Serbian military's withdrawal from Kosovo.

In his chilling phrase, Djokovic was 'surrounded by death'. Outside that bunker, he has recalled, Belgrade was glowing like a ripe tangerine. The city was either in black-out or lit up by NATO jets, and nothing in between. For 78 consecutive nights, the planes came, scattering their bombs. When the sirens started, the Djokovic family would scramble to get inside the bunker, which was in the basement of his

grandfather Vladimir's apartment building. At the start of the bombing campaign, Djokovic and his brothers and parents had been living around 200m (650ft) away, in a building that didn't have its own shelter. They had to make their way there through the darkness and the chaos and the noise.

As Srdjan Djokovic saw it, there was trauma in the spring of 1999 that would last a lifetime. Novak's most distressing memory is of one night during the first week of the bombings when, around three in the morning, the sound of explosions near to the apartment, and of breaking glass, woke and startled the family. Quickly getting to her feet, Novak's mother bashed her head against a radiator and knocked herself out. For what seemed like an age, but might have been only a few seconds, she was out cold on the floor. All three Djokovic brothers were crying. When Dijana came to, the family tried to find their way to the shelter but they could hardly see – there was no lighting and the streets were filled with smoke. And with the sound of the planes and the explosions, it was so loud they couldn't hear each other, even when they were only centimetres apart and screaming in each other's ears.

Overwhelmed and panicking, Novak slipped on a stone and, as he scraped his hands and knees and fell to the ground, he looked up and saw a grey steel triangle, which he later realized was a F-117 stealth bomber, 'tearing across the sky'. It's an image that has always stayed with him; the deathly triangle coming from nowhere and unleashing rockets at a hospital just a couple of blocks away. With its horizontal design, the hospital had become 'a giant club sandwich stuffed with fire'. Djokovic thought he was going to die. A moment later, the jet was gone, and the Djokovic family continued to the shelter. As much as Djokovic now craves

the rush of sound from a cheering crowd after winning a big point, he is still afraid of sudden, loud noises. If a fire alarm goes off, it can make him jump.

To be closer to the bunker, the family of five moved into the first-floor, two-bedroom apartment that belonged to Djokovic's grandfather, which for security had a metal gate as well as a regular front door. Outside the bunker, the streets were thrumming with explosions; inside, children were trembling and shaking with fear.

For the first few nights, at least. Something shifted after that. The families in the bunker had come to accept that this was their new reality, and since they were going to be down there, they might as well try to distract themselves. Packed closely together – Djokovic has estimated that there were 50 apartments in the building, and every part of the concrete floor was occupied – the residents played some cards, they sang and they played Monopoly, Risk and other board games. But that normality was just surface deep. Strong, lifelong bonds were formed inside that place of huge physical and emotional discomfort – it was around that time that Djokovic met a boy of his own age, Neven Markovic, who also lived on the first floor of that building. Markovic, a former professional footballer who was Djokovic's best man at his wedding to Jelena Ristic, remains one of the tennis player's closest friends.

Spend just a few minutes inside the basement and you start to crave air and natural light (it's troubling to imagine returning to that bunker night after night). Outside, murals of Djokovic break up the greyness. Beneath Djokovic's old home is an image of him with his grandfather on one side and his first coach, Jelena Gencic, on the other. Go past the concrete playground – where Djokovic used to hit tennis balls around as

a child – and you will find another painting of him, which says in Serbian: 'In god we trust.' As one neighbour pointed out, there's an unforced error in the mural, as it shows Djokovic hitting a backhand left-handed, but that hardly takes away from the power of the image and what the athlete signifies to the people of Banjica: how one of their own made something of himself on the world stage.

A group of teenagers hanging around near Djokovic's old apartment block spoke fondly of him, and not so much about his tennis (their grandmothers always let them know when his matches are on television and encourage them to watch too), but about his generosity. About the money he has donated to the local school to buy essentials and how, if he has been in the city, he has found the time to present the trophies to the winner of a football tournament played on the concrete pitch. For all the horror that Djokovic experienced in Banjica, it's also somewhere that brings back fond memories, of the times when he was outside playing games with his friends (though he shredded his knees so often on the concrete playground that he's not quite sure how they are still healthy, and there were times when he accidentally smashed the windows of a neighbour's ground-floor apartment with a ball and had to run for it).

This is indelible trauma. On the drive back into the centre of Belgrade, you pass an old military building that was bombed in 1999 and never repaired; this is a city where you don't have to look too hard to see the scars of war, but where most, Djokovic included, want to move on from the past.

For many years, anger was eating up Djokovic from the inside. He regarded the 1999 bombings as the 'ultimate cruelty' and, like many

other Serbians, he was raging, even vengeful. From childhood into adulthood, he felt that inner rage. Djokovic couldn't understand why the nations that made up NATO had joined together in bombarding a small country, dropping bombs on what he described as the helpless people on the street. 'The scars of this emotion, of this anger, are still today present in everybody,' Djokovic has said. In the early stages of his career, he used that rage as fuel, propelling him to some success on tour. If Djokovic was 'stuck', as he put it, in hatred and anger, it felt as though he had at least turned that to his advantage. Djokovic was playing angry and that anger was taking him places.

And yet, in time, Djokovic came to see that carrying feelings of 'hatred, revenge and betrayal' can weigh you down and hold you back, both professionally and personally. Djokovic no longer wanted to feel that way. There's a parable about a snake and a carpenter's saw that Djokovic has felt fits with his realization that staying angry was only going to hurt himself. When the snake accidently cuts itself on a saw, it believes the tool has attacked it and, upset and wanting revenge, envelops the saw. The snake bleeds to death.

As Djokovic has acknowledged, there are different levels of suffering and trauma among the Serbian people. Djokovic's family was fortunate in the sense that they didn't lose their home or anyone close, though when the newspapers printed the names of the dead, his parents recognized some of them – he has struggled to imagine the pain that some Serbs would have felt when their relatives or friends were killed. While Djokovic will never forget the NATO bombings and the death and devastation that they brought to his country, and he would have seen the 'fuck NATO' graffiti in Belgrade, he chose to forgive. It was a conscious

decision, to work on himself and his emotions and to deal with that inner rage. Djokovic no longer wanted to be fuelled by anger, but by love and 'love is forgiveness'.

That wasn't easy but Djokovic had an open mind – which we will explore in greater depth later in the book – and he has also said he was opening his heart. 'Novak probably reached that place of forgiveness, and came to that realization, sooner than someone else might have done,' said Dusan Vemic, who first met Djokovic when the future great was six or seven years old, and who then went on to coach him on the ATP Tour. 'As a human, Novak is always growing and learning. He has a growth mindset and he's a never-ending student of life. He came to that place in life where he tried to understand people's decision-making and to put himself in their shoes and trying to be as rational as he can be.'

Moving on from that anger would have helped Djokovic to become a stronger person, according to Jelena Jankovic, a Serb who was the world number one for women's singles. 'As a nation, you're going to be angry when someone is bombing you. That's a scary situation. But us normal people, we couldn't do anything about that,' she reflected. 'But once you overcome that, it makes you stronger as a person, and you try to do the best that you can to make a living for yourself and to make a name for yourself.'

Djokovic's faith, as an Orthodox Christian, allowed him to forgive, said his boyhood coach Bogdan Obradovic, who has known him since he was ten years old. 'That is Novak's philosophy and generally people in Serbia have that Orthodox approach,' said Obradovic. 'We are able to forgive.' Djokovic was able to move on, to unstick himself.

'If you're stuck in [anger],' Djokovic has said, 'what are you going to make out of your life?'

*

Djokovic liked, if possible, to be one day behind the bombers. After dressing for practice and packing his racquet bag with the care you might take before going to a country club, he would leave the apartment at dawn and go out to chase the destruction around Belgrade. He was looking for newly blackened grass, just-formed craters, and steel and concrete that was freshly disfigured. For the places that were still rattling and burning from the day before.

As perverse or as ghastly as it might seem now, there was a logic to Djokovic and his family listening to the news on the radio about where the bombs had been dropped the night before and then seeking out courts in areas of the city that had just been hit: the NATO bombing command were unlikely to target the same spots again so soon. Djokovic also had to keep an eye on the time: to be an aspiring young tennis player in Belgrade in the spring of 1999 was to be an amateur analyst of NATO's bombing patterns. You had to learn – and sometimes, despite all the horror, this almost felt like a game to him – when was the safest time of day to be on court. Often dawn was the quietest part of the day; sometimes it was lunch.

When Djokovic is in Belgrade these days, he tends to train elsewhere, at a smarter, slicker facility, where there's a bit of a scene, with expensive-looking men and women sipping espressos on the terrace above the outside courts (there are also indoor courts). But as a boy he often played at the Partizan Tennis Club. Scruffy around the edges, with graffiti on the outside walls and green paint flaking off inside, it's hardly the

most Instagrammable of locations; it's a tennis club with a friendly, understated, unassuming vibe that doesn't make too much of its Djokovic connection. While there are posters of Djokovic inside the entrance, they are fading and yellowed – from years back when he used to endorse Adidas – and he gets equal billing with Ana Ivanovic, a winner of one Grand Slam title, with images of her all over the other side. A few old photographs of Djokovic – including some showing him in the club's black and white striped kit – hang from the walls. But there isn't a statue or anything official celebrating how the most successful tennis player in history used to train here; while there is a bust, it's of a former general who was part of the club's earlier history.

Even at a time when almost every choice you made came with substantial risk, playing at the Partizan Tennis Club could have been a particularly dangerous move: it was close to Banjica, but it was also near a military school, which often drew the bombers to the area. His mother was on edge; what if NATO dropped a bomb on her son's practice court?

A few weeks into NATO's bombing campaign, something surprising had happened: many people in Belgrade had decided they were going to stop being afraid. 'After so much death, so much destruction, we simply stopped hiding,' Djokovic wrote in *Serve to Win*. There was a freedom, Djokovic has observed, in recognizing that you were powerless in the face of NATO's firepower, and to accept your fate. Djokovic and his family had been part of that shift in mindset around the city. They had stopped going to the bunker every night. Djokovic's mother became fatalistic about the prospect of death, telling her family and others in the basement that she would go crazy if she spent another night there. She would be taking her family back home to their apartment and if NATO dropped

a bomb on their building, that was their destiny. Djokovic, no doubt influenced by what his parents were saying, was thinking along the same lines: 'If we're hit, we're hit, what can we do?'

The war brought the Djokovic family together. Physically – as the five of them slept in the same bed, with blankets covering the windows to stop shattered glass – and emotionally too. One of Djokovic's strongest memories from the bombing campaign – this was a powerful and unifying moment, but also a subversive one – was when thousands of people gathered on one of Belgrade's bridges, all wearing T-shirts with targets on the front. They even had targets painted on top of their heads and they were singing; they were mocking NATO's pilots. If Djokovic's family and nation could survive this, he thought, then there wasn't much that could break them down, and he could do anything he wanted with the rest of his life. After this, everything else, tennis included, would seem easy by comparison.

In the middle of a bombing campaign, Djokovic had also carried on playing tennis. Djokovic's desire to keep on training, amid the hellish circumstances, meant that his tennis education didn't slip at a time of war (there was only a short loss of focus in the first few days of the bombings). In fact, with the schools closed, his training intensified. Even more importantly, the focus on Novak's training – up to four or five hours – also helped to keep his family going during those times, providing some sense of normality and routine (even if he was hopping around the city looking for somewhere to play).

Djokovic's mother was adamant – the family weren't going to sit around all day at home crying. If you did that, she has said, you would have gone mad with worry about whether your apartment was about to be

bombed. Djokovic's love for tennis – he had been fascinated by the sport since he saw a tennis court for the first time at the age of three – gave them a reason to get out of the apartment each day, to continue living. Often there wasn't a net on the court that Djokovic found, or the surface was cracked and broken, with Belgrade's tennis facilities among the collateral damage of war. But that never mattered. And while it was dangerous to be on a tennis court in Belgrade, it was often no more dangerous than anywhere else in the city; Djokovic's coach at the time, Jelena Gencic, had lost her sister who was killed during a bombing raid. By seven o'clock in the evening, the Djokovics would be home with the curtains closed, just as they were supposed to be. Sometimes, Djokovic's need for normality collided with the ongoing reality of living in a city under bombardment. Sirens going off during practice along with jets slicing up the sky. When Djokovic celebrated turning 12 at the Partizan Tennis Club, his family were singing happy birthday to him when a plane suddenly rushed over them, drowning them out.

Coming through – as he described – 'horrifying' moments such as those, when he felt completely helpless, gave Djokovic an inner strength and resilience that has stayed with him throughout his career; it also made him hungrier, even more ambitious to succeed as a tennis player. He wanted to show how a young boy who had survived the horrors of war could become the best in tennis, a global sport played by athletes from far wealthier nations that also weren't being bombarded.

Destroyed but still alive. That was Djokovic during the war, according to Bogdan Obradovic. In his view, Djokovic's early experiences in life gave him extra energy and lasting strength and resilience. 'The people who suffered so much during the terrible war, it couldn't keep on getting

worse. It had to stop at some point. You're going to hit the ground. After that, it's either going to be bad or you're going to climb up again. There are no other options. When you have some evil that attacks you, you get used to it. You get to know exactly who you're fighting against and you see that even the evil doesn't even enjoy it that much. You're destroyed but you're still alive,' Obradovic said. 'After that, you come with some sort of unexplainable energy. All these things, they're either going to destroy you or they're going to make you stronger. That's what happened with Novak – he became a stronger person.'

Even before the bombing had started, life had been extraordinarily hard in Belgrade under an international trade embargo – Djokovic has recalled queuing at 5.45am for bread to share with his family. 'A boy like me, growing up in Serbia, becoming a tennis champion? It was unlikely in even the best of circumstances. And it became ever more unlikely when the bombs started dropping,' Djokovic once wrote. But is it possible that the opposite is true? That the bombing campaign actually increased Djokovic's chances of making it to the tennis tour? Just as there are ups and downs in life, Obradovic said, you get the same wild ride on a tennis court; Djokovic wouldn't have realized it at the time but being brutalized by war, including spending night after night in a bomb shelter, would have given him even more inner strength.

War also appeared to have hardened Djokovic's friend Ivanovic, who as a girl sometimes used to practise at the bottom of an empty swimming pool, and who would go on to become the women's world number one. With Jankovic, another Serb who would top the world rankings, this was a golden generation of three future world number ones. 'We were hungry because nothing was ever given to us,' Jankovic said. 'Everything we had,

we had to earn, and we had to work harder than everybody else from other countries just to prove ourselves. While we came from a country that wasn't very wealthy and didn't have any great facilities or any tennis tradition, and at times it felt like a mission impossible, what we did have was a strong will. As a nation, we don't accept second place. We had to be number one, there was no other option. Either you're the best or you're nothing. That's the mentality we have.'

They say there's no direct translation into English of the Serbian word 'inat'. It's kind of a mix of defiance, spite, stubbornness and f-you bloody-mindedness, with perhaps a little snark and acid wit blended in; some would say that Djokovic has had that since his early days in tennis, and that it still pushes him today. 'Inat is when you're angry and you have this really strong motivation to prove people wrong. You want to do really well. I think Novak has had that feeling his whole career,' said Jankovic. 'I also had that. As a nation we all have that in our nature. We want to be the best. We're going to succeed even though we come from a small country that isn't the wealthiest and doesn't have the greatest facilities. But we have what other athletes don't have. We have inat. And we're going to prove you wrong.'

The 1999 bombings continue to shape Djokovic's thinking on court. 'Novak's background, with the war and bombs going off all around him, has made him fearless,' observed Chris Evert, a former world number one and a winner of 18 Grand Slam women's singles titles. 'When you've been through a childhood like that, those kind of PTSD experiences, you lose all fears. If that doesn't mould you into a certain type of person, having those experiences at such a young age, I don't know what would. Novak uses all the negative times in his life, such as his country going to

war, to give himself strength in his matches. He's saying to himself: "OK, it's five-all in the fifth set, Novak, but you've been through a lot worse than this." The war has taken away the fear factor in his tennis and in his life. It's made him stronger and more resilient as a result. There's a depth of strength to him.'

Some close to Djokovic would suggest that the war's impact on his route to greatness shouldn't be overstated. While it has helped galvanize him, it's possible that, if he had grown up in more peaceful and prosperous times, he would still have been so successful. 'It's true that this part of Novak's story is extreme,' said Janko Tipsarevic, who grew up in Belgrade before becoming a top-ten player and is one of Djokovic's closest friends (they have been on holiday together with their families a few times).

'Lots of athletes come from poverty or from single-parent homes or areas with gun violence – look at the NBA or the NFL in America. But this was so remarkable because these were life-threatening moments, night after night. For two and a half months, for us it was normal that they were going to bomb us in the evening so we went into the shelter and during the day we would play tennis. I'm sure that these moments made Novak even more resilient in the end and helped him achieve his goals. But it helped by 5 or 10 per cent, and nothing more than that. I have such a big belief in his mental ability, in his mental greatness, that even if his father had been Jeff Bezos, and he had grown up in a rich country, he still would have become what he was destined to be, the greatest.'

From her perspective as a tennis psychologist – for the past few years she has travelled on the tour with the Polish Grand Slam winner Iga Swiatek – Daria Abramowicz has sensed that Djokovic's early life

experiences, and the story he tells himself and others, appear to have made him extraordinarily resilient. 'Novak identifies as a proud Serbian. He's strongly connected to his country. When your country has this kind of history and you're then able to go on to build a happy life, and a successful career, it may give you an enormous strength and a resilience that is beyond measure. Sometimes also it might be a burden, and it might be both in some situations. It's extremely individual, that's for sure,' Abramowicz said. 'My take, and you can see this on so many levels, is that Novak has become incredibly strong and resilient.'

Inside Djokovic's head there are other lasting effects of the bombings. Having survived the horror and the hardships, he is always appreciative of what he has in his life. And, strange as it might sound, Djokovic came through 1999 with something even more powerful: hope.

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To say that Djokovic came from nowhere isn't hyperbole. He was born into a country – Yugoslavia – that no longer exists and a place where there was next to no tennis culture.

As Djokovic has acknowledged, tennis used to be about as popular in Belgrade as fencing. At that time, 'tennis was nowhere – it was almost dead', according to Bogdan Obradovic, who, as well as coaching Djokovic on and off from the age of ten to sixteen, also later captained him to the Davis Cup title. Aside from all the concrete, one of the legacies of communism was that tennis was still regarded as an aristocratic sport in Yugoslavia and then Serbia. One club in Belgrade was purely for ambassadors and diplomats and for years Serbian television only broadcast one professional tennis match a year, the Wimbledon men's singles final; images from Centre Court, where the players were dressed

all in white, would hardly have persuaded viewers in Belgrade that it was a game for the workers. 'It was a sport for aristocrats,' Obradovic recalled. 'Everyone was a bit scared of tennis.'

If the Serbian government had any money to invest in sport, it was directed at team sports such as football, basketball and handball, as well as volleyball and water polo. Why take the risk of investing in an individual who had big dreams in, of all things, an aristocratic pursuit?

Once a place of 'serenity' – Djokovic's word – where he would see rabbits running through the trees, the area around Kopaonik in the Serbian mountains had been covered in cluster-bombs in 1999. For years afterwards, the danger of unexploded ordnance in those mountains meant it wasn't safe for Djokovic to return to what he has called 'the most beautiful tennis club in the world'. It was there, aged four, on three clay courts near his parents' Red Bull pizzeria, that he had first played tennis. Almost 20 years after the war, by which time the bombs had been deactivated, Djokovic was able to go back. The club was abandoned, ruined, and had been absorbed by the forest. But, for Djokovic, it was still a place loaded with meaning and significance. One of the stone buildings was in ruins, half of a wooden structure was flattened and the tennis wall – where he had spent so many happy hours and days as a child practising his technique – was pocked with holes from bomb damage.

But at least the wall was somehow still standing, that it had, as Djokovic put it, 'endured', as had his emotional connection with that spot of land. Djokovic's affection for those courts – which were covered in vegetation when he returned in the late 2010s – is partly because of the nature around there. But also because of how that place changed his life.

No one in Djokovic's family had ever played tennis before. It was just pure luck, an outrageous piece of good fortune – or as Djokovic would say, 'destiny' – that someone had decided to construct some courts right there in front of the restaurant. If those tennis courts hadn't been built right there, it's possible that he might have never been exposed to the sport at a young age, or perhaps not at all. Did Djokovic even get to choose the 'journey' – as he described it – that he was on? He believes that his soul – just like everyone else's – had some predetermined goals and missions. He just had to find out what they were.

Djokovic also believes his soul chose his parents. He was born into a skiing family – his father, uncle and aunt were skiers and they all idolized Italian ski racer Alberto Tomba. Djokovic's parents even met on a ski slope – his mother had fallen over in the snow when his father, a ski instructor, appeared and asked her whether she needed any help. Djokovic doesn't think it was surprising that he got into sport; it was just unexpected that he chose tennis, a decision that would mean his parents would be out of their comfort zones. It wasn't a world they knew and, not for the last time, the Djokovics would have to open their minds. Srdjan and Dijana couldn't be completely certain what they were signing up for.

From the moment he saw tennis, Djokovic adored the sport. Djokovic's love for tennis didn't start in 1991 when he had his first racquet. You can spool even further back in time, to when he was just three and he would take food and drinks out to the men who were constructing the tennis courts in front of his family's restaurant. In those moments, Djokovic's father noticed how his son looked at the courts. Srdjan bought 'Nole' (Djokovic's nickname) a neon pink racquet and a foam ball. Djokovic didn't care what colour it was, only that it was his. When Djokovic wasn't

taking big swings with that racquet – a video has survived of him on court wearing a green tracksuit, a baseball cap and a look of total concentration – he carried it around all day, not ever wanting to put it down.

There was a second piece of luck. Jelena Gencic, who had previously mentored Monica Seles and Djokovic's future coach Goran Ivanisevic, started running sessions for children on those courts. Djokovic was five years old when he first joined in. He was no ordinary five-year-old, as Gencic discovered. Before that first session, Djokovic was half an hour early and had brought with him a large tennis bag containing his racquet, a towel, a bottle of water, a banana and some wristbands. Gencic was astounded: 'Who packed your bag, your mother?' To which Djokovic replied: 'No, I packed it.' She asked him how he had known what he would need. From watching tennis on television, he said. Djokovic's perfectionism, so obvious to everyone now, was there from the start.

Just days later, Gencic would tell Djokovic's parents that their boy, about the same height as a net post, was special, that he was a 'zlatno dete', a golden child. Golden because, as well as talent, he had a focus that suggested he had a big future in professional tennis. That resonated with Dijana, who saw Novak as 'a child of god'. 'Jelena gave Novak and his family hope that he could make it as a tennis player,' said Jankovic. 'Nobody believed that was possible until Jelena supported him.'

Djokovic's dreams in tennis started with the conversations he had with Gencic. 'Jelena triggered a dream in Novak and that's what he has been following all of his life,' said Obradovic. 'Jelena passed Novak the love and passion for tennis. It was big for Novak, and for the family too,

to have somebody supporting him and saying good things about him that he was very talented and that one day he could be number one. She loved tennis and she loved hard work. She was very disciplined. She was like an officer in the army, very tough. But she did it all with a big smile on her face. Jelena was very positive.'

You don't need to be a psychologist to recognize that there are few more contrasting tennis personalities than Pete Sampras and Djokovic. Every so often in the 1990s, Sampras would leap high off the Wimbledon grass, hanging in the air like he was a basketball player in the NBA, and hit a slam-dunk smash. But, that aside, the Californian was all tennis and never showbusiness. And yet it was Sampras, the quiet and reserved alpha of the All England Club, who would inspire a young Serbian boy, who would become one of the great extroverts of the sport, to think he was destined to win Wimbledon too. Djokovic's first memory of watching the Championships on television – he was six years old at the time – was seeing Sampras win the title in 1993. Looking back, Djokovic can appreciate that he and Sampras are very different people, but what he liked about his idol was how he coped with the pressure and always seemed to serve well on the biggest points. Mentally, Djokovic had never seen anyone as robust as Sampras inside the white heat of Wimbledon's Centre Court.

Using pieces of plastic and scraps of paper, Djokovic made himself a pretend Wimbledon trophy. He wouldn't have known it at the time, but the young Novak was using a mental approach that he would often rely on as an adult: visualization. 'Hello,' he would say, holding up his plastic trophy and talking to himself in the mirror, 'my name is Novak Djokovic and I'm the Wimbledon champion.' Years later, when Djokovic won

Wimbledon for the first time in 2011 – and he hoisted the actual golden, pineapple-topped trophy – his mind flashed back to his childhood, to the moments when he had dreamed of that very moment. Until he was seven, tennis was all about fun. But then it got serious. That was Djokovic's age when he made an appearance on Serbian national television, informing viewers that, 'tennis is my job' and articulating his vision for the future: he was going to become the world number one.

It was around that time that Dusan Vemic, who is 11 years Djokovic's senior, met a young Novak at the Partizan Tennis Club. Vemic was astounded by the way the young boy spoke. 'The racquet bag was almost as big as him, almost down to his knees. In the beginning, I thought he was just a cute little kid and then after speaking to him – and he would have been just six or seven years old at the time – I realized that I could have had an adult conversation with him. He was one of those prodigy kids,' recalled Vemic, who years later would become part of Djokovic's coaching team.

'Novak's mind is brilliant in so many ways. He acts and thinks and speaks probably 20 years older than he is. He can surprise you with some of the things that he can grasp. That was true when he was a boy. I immediately realized that he was a deep thinker and that he was clear about what he was doing, such as working on his technique and his footwork. You understood that he meant what he was saying. It was amazing to see someone that young who was thinking of tennis in that way, and who wasn't just playing around. I couldn't have imagined then that Novak would become who he is today. But I did think, from that very first conversation, that there was something special about that kid's mind.'

Djokovic's mind, rather than his game, was the first indication that he had greatness ahead.

As a child, he had a focus, even during the less exciting moments of matches, that was beyond some adult athletes. 'Sometimes tennis can be a bit boring as it's not like every second, and every point, feels as though it should be on a highlights reel,' said Vemic. 'That's where you need focus. Maturity usually comes with many years of high-level tennis. He played that way from the get-go, since he was a child. He prepared for every single match to the best of his abilities and he was focused on every point. He respected every single point.'

Fortunately for Djokovic, he had Gencic, his 'second mother'. She was so much more than a tennis coach to him. Learning how to hit a tennis ball was just one element of the education that Djokovic got with Gencic. From a young age, Djokovic knew about the importance of nutrition, with Gencic telling him how Seles didn't drink Coca-Cola or eat cheeseburgers, or about how Seles valued sleep. Every day, it felt to Djokovic as though Seles was in his head. He grew to admire and love the nine-time Grand Slam champion (and as an adult, he has wondered how many more majors she would have won if she hadn't been stabbed in the back while on court in Hamburg in 1993). Listening to classical music was one key module. Gencic introduced him to Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* and asked him how he felt while listening to it – she wanted him to remember that surge of adrenaline, and the power of the music, and to use that on court if he was having a rough day and needed to find a way of raising his level. She encouraged him to learn languages, to sing, to read poetry, including the works of Russian romantic poet Alexander Pushkin, and to

'breathe consciously'. If you want to know why Djokovic thinks differently to most athletes, you can't ignore Gencic; she taught him to open his mind.

Djokovic was in the middle of a Grand Slam – Roland Garros in 2013 – when he was told that Gencic had died. Unable to attend her funeral, he wrote a letter, which his mother read out. Djokovic called Gencic an 'angel' and thanked her for her patience, support and 'enormous love'.

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'Golden child' or tennis 'alien'? At ten years old, Djokovic had a 'cosmic energy' about him on the tennis court. The first time Obradovic saw the young boy play, he immediately picked up on that energy, which almost felt as though the child wasn't quite human, as if he were an extra-terrestrial. 'Novak didn't play the best tennis then. His technique wasn't supreme in that moment. But everyone around him was going, "Whoa" as you could feel and see some energy. Like he's from outer space. Like an alien.'

Djokovic's father had brought his son to Obradovic, to a tennis club in Belgrade's suburbs, to ask the coach what he thought of the boy's prospects. Aside from Djokovic's alien-like energy and obvious talent, there was another reason why Obradovic was left 'in complete shock' from this first encounter: the child's professionalism. It wasn't just that the 'quiet boy' had packed a tennis bag – which he had been doing for years – but that, without being asked, he had started warming up, running around the court. Other ten-year-olds had to be introduced to the idea of preparing your body for practice, and then reminded; Djokovic already knew what was required. Obradovic was astounded by

the focus that Djokovic brought to every shot, and how he also already had a cool-down and stretching routine.

At the end of their first practice session, Obradovic asked Djokovic: 'What do you want from tennis? What's your goal?' Djokovic was clear: 'I want to become number one in the world.' Obradovic replied: 'That's easy to say but there are a lot of things that you have to do to get there.' Djokovic wasn't fazed: 'It's OK. I will do everything that's necessary to get there. That's my dream and I believe I will get there.'

Električni Orgazam, or Electro Orgasm, are a rock band from Belgrade who were big in Yugoslavia in the 1980s. Unbeknown to them, they played a significant role in Djokovic's tennis development, helping him to become the greatest returner in history. Obradovic, whose two loves are tennis and music, took his guitar on to the practice court one day and played Djokovic a song by Electro Orgasm called 'Everyone in Yugoslavia is Playing Rock 'n' Roll'. He wanted to show Djokovic that returning an opponent's serve has much in common with playing and listening to music: it was all about rhythm. 'Listen, Novak, you have to follow the rhythm of the song,' Obradovic said. 'And then you'll feel the rhythm in your return, in your movement, in everything. It's like a song. It's all connected.'

As Obradovic said to Djokovic as he played his guitar, 'the music is in between the notes'. The message he wanted to pass on was that everything in tennis and music is about timing, so being a great returner is all about 'having good rhythm and doing something at the right moment'. He was asking Djokovic to notice everything about his opponent's serve. He wanted him to listen to the sound of the ball being struck as he was going to be reacting to that as much to the sight of his opponent's service

motion. Obradovic encouraged Djokovic to become attuned to an opponent's service rhythm: his hands, the way he tossed the ball into the air, how he moved his body and the racquet towards the ball, how he hit the ball and everything about the racquet. 'You will have that rhythm of reading and reacting,' said Obradovic, who also introduced Djokovic to the Beatles, playing him 'Yesterday' and many of their other songs.

But, in many ways, his lesson about Electro Orgasm went beyond the tennis court. Before he put his guitar away, Obradovic had one more message about rock 'n' roll: 'The most important part, Novak, is this: if you hear and understand the music, you will become a happier person.'