

Intercontinental Hotel, Belgrade

You know, Ben, Ive had you checked out..., Zoran dropped his eye contact with me and continued in a softer voice With some friends...contacts... of mine. He reached for his packet of Marlboro Lights, lost in the debris of a long and drunken lunch scattered over the stiff tablecloth, and lit one ceremoniously. He exhaled slowly, took another drag, exhaled, then fixed me in the eye again. And you check out.

I felt my fists closing involuntarily, the fingernails digging into the sweating palms. Despite the heavy meal, my stomach suddenly felt empty, like it used to before a night-time heavy kit parachute jump. I wanted to get out of the hotel dining room fast. Because I knew that, if Zoran had really checked me out with the Serbian Secret Police, he would have found that my credentials didnt add up.

It was my second meeting with Zoran Obradovic. Two weeks earlier I had made the long trip to meet him in the same down-town Belgrade hotel. UN sanctions against Serbia, imposed on 1 June 1992, were in full swing and there were no direct flights - I had to fly to Budapest, then take the overnight bus the xxx <check> kms to Belgrade. He had seemed promising agent material. A freelance journalist in his thirties, of mixed Serbian and Croatian parentage, he professed himself to have neutral views on the civil war and stubbornly proclaimed his nationality to be Yugoslav. Though his views were liberal - he even contributed regularly to the anti-war B52 radio station - he enjoyed excellent access to senior military officers and politicians in both Serbia and Croatia. Moreover his pudgy features displayed his taste for imported wine, good food and western cigarettes, all of which were prohibitively expensive under the sanctions. He had taken my consultancy fee, some 500 Deutschemarks or so, with scarcely disguised alacrity. All the characteristics were there - access, suitability, motivation - that suggested that Obradovic might make a good agent. Back in Century House, String Vest enthusiastically recommended that I continue the cultivation. Obradovic looked like he could fill a few gaps in the intelligence