

Nothing to shake on while war remains raging in my homeland

EXCLUSIVE
By Lord Ashcroft

FOR the last two years, she has been the darling of the Wimbledon crowd: first for returning shortly after having a baby to reach the semi-finals of the tournament, more recently because she wept tears of despair on court after a children's hospital in her nation's capital was targeted by Russian missiles.

For even longer, as Ukraine's best-known sportswoman and, for a time, the world's No 3 women's tennis player, Elina Svitolina has earned global respect for her passionate support for her homeland since the full-scale Russian invasion three years ago.

Making her own private stand, she has refused to shake hands with Russian or Belarusian opponents while the war remains raging in Ukraine. Now she has given an exclusive and candid interview about the war and its tragic consequences in my role as lead sponsor of an security summit in her home city of Odesa.

Next month, she will return to Wimbledon to play in this year's tournament.

No opponent or critic of Ukraine or its president is spared Elina's wrath, notably President Vladimir Putin, whom she considers "evil" for his unprovoked attack on Ukraine, and President Donald Trump for trying to humiliate Volodymyr Zelensky after inviting him to the White House three months ago. Of the Russian dictator, she says: "Of course, I feel a lot of hate towards him. For me, it is not only hate towards President Putin but also towards Russia. I feel sadness, anger, just very, very deep [emotions]."

She believes one day President Putin and his military commanders must be brought before a war crimes tribunal for their numerous atrocities, including at Bucha when hundreds of civilians were shot in cold blood and their bodies were left to decompose on the streets. "So many things happened to our country and they should be punished for that," she said firmly.

In contrast, Elina has nothing but praise for the courage and calm leadership of President Zelensky whom she has met several times. "I admire him a lot. I feel like he's a very strong leader and for the whole of his presidency we couldn't wish for a better person to go through this... disaster."

In February, President Trump was openly hostile to President Zelensky after inviting him to the Oval Office for peace talks. The US President tried to belittle, even humili-

Ahead of her return to Wimbledon next month, Ukrainian tennis favourite Elina Svitolina speaks to Lord Ashcroft about supporting her embattled country, her tears for victims of the conflict... and her refusal to acknowledge her Russian or Belarusian opponents on court



FAVOURITE: Elina acknowledges crowd at Wimbledon 2023



BATTLEZONE: Tennis star swaps her whites for camo to visit the Kharkiv frontline in December

way lucky to have Zelensky there because if it had just been a normal civilian from Ukraine, Trump would get more aggression and more rough [angry] words towards him."

Elina was born in the Black Sea city of Odesa to a sporting couple.

Her father is a former wrestler, her mother is a former top rower – from both parents she inherited the

body of an elite athlete and a gritty determination to compete at the highest level in her chosen sport – tennis.

She first picked up a tennis racket aged five, by the age of 12 she moved to Kharkiv in order to receive the best coaching. For well over a decade, as one of the top players, she has travelled the world but today she is

based in Monaco. Last month, competing in the Madrid Open she won her 18th Women's Tennis Association (WTA) singles' title.

ELINA is married to fellow professional tennis player, Gaël Monfils, and they have a daughter Skai, aged two. She spoke with affection about her husband and his unstinting support for her and her homeland. "He cares about Ukraine, he cares about my mental state because, as you can imagine, I had some tough moments," she said. "So I am really thankful for his support and his understanding."

Like all Ukrainians, Elina's life was turned upside down when Russia invaded her homeland on February 24, 2022. At this point, she was already pregnant with her first child. "Ukraine has always been, and always will be, my homeland. It's where I feel most free. I feel the energy of the people. I feel it's where I belong and I try to come back as

much as I can," she said. She recalled the morning of the invasion with horror when she was in Monaco preparing to fly that day to Mexico to play in her next tournament.

"It was a terrible, terrible, terrible morning. I woke up to the [phone] calls from my family, my friends," she recalls sadly.

"The next 48 hours I don't remember because everything was just a lot of stress and a lot of sadness. I felt so helpless. For the first few months, I was in complete panic. It was a disaster time. I stopped playing and took some time off [from tennis]."

In the spring of 2022, she accepted an invitation from her president to be an ambassador for United24, to raise awareness and money for Ukraine's predicament. "Little by little, not without tough moments, I found my path," she told me.

When Elina returned to the tennis court after a break from the sport, she initially refused to play against a Russian opponent. Later, she agreed to play a Russian or Belarusian player but she declined to shake hands with them after their match. "There

are still people dying because of the missiles and homes are being destroyed. Because they are representing their country, I will not shake their hands."

Today Elina feels proud to represent her country, both on and off the court, during hugely challenging times for Ukraine.

She is also an ambassador for Bring Kids Back UA, which campaigns for Ukrainian children abducted and taken to Russia to be returned to their homeland.

"More than 20,000 kids have been stolen

BACKING KIDS ON COURT

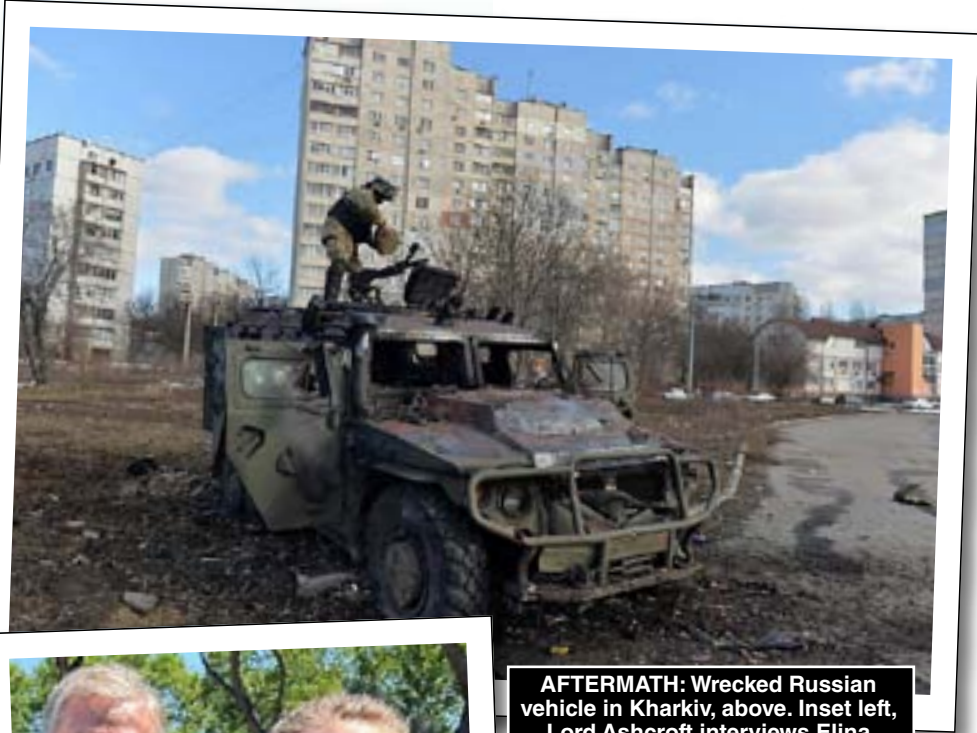
Lord Ashcroft has made a donation to the Svitolina Foundation which helps talented children, including those displaced by the war, to improve their tennis. For more information on the charity's work, visit elinasvitolinafoundation.org The Black Sea Security Forum takes place in Odesa. See odesaforum.org

from Ukraine. They are the future of Ukraine. We need to bring all the kids back slowly, little by little, every day," she said.

She said representing Ukraine during a time of war inspires her to do well on court. "Each time I step on court, with the Ukrainian flag by my name, it is another opportunity for people to support Ukraine, to talk about Ukraine and for me to raise awareness. I try to play with a lot of love for my country and to fight for Ukraine."

It was during Wimbledon last year that Ukraine suffered the attack that most affected Elina: the missile strike on the main children's hospital in Kyiv and other civilian areas around Ukraine reportedly killed 42 people, including five children, and injured 190 more.

After playing and winning her match later that day, Elina was interviewed on court, wearing a black ribbon, and she broke down as she described her shock at the cowardly assault by Russia. "It's a very difficult day today for Ukrainian people," she said with understatement, wiping tears from her eyes.



AFTERMATH: Wrecked Russian vehicle in Kharkiv, above. Inset left, Lord Ashcroft interviews Elina

Even now her voice begins to break as she recalls what she regards as the most horrific of all the attacks on her homeland.

"There have been so many [terrible] moments but this affected me the most. I woke up and I saw so much pain, kids suffering and their families suffering. Especially being a mum, it really struck me. I felt it was my mission to tell people [in her post-match interview] what was happening in Ukraine and what had happened that particular day."

Today, while her parents are largely living in Monaco, Elina still has her elderly grandmother, her uncle and other relatives and friends living in Odesa. She told me that she had "only bright memories" of her childhood in Odesa. "It's a beautiful city, a city of humour," she said. "Now it's changed, it has a lot of people [refugees] from cities that have been destroyed. Drones hit the city on many nights. Of course, it's very sad for me to see and to witness."

OF THE current international talks aimed at a ceasefire and, eventually, a peace deal, she says: "Like every Ukrainian, I want a ceasefire because we want to live in a calm, safe Ukraine. But also, on the other hand, I feel like Russia should be punished for the evil things that they have done to us... our children, our families, our cities." She says the West must stay strong in its financial and military support for Ukraine, with European nations leading the way. "Ukraine is not just fighting for themselves but for the whole of Europe... if they [Russia] take Ukraine, they will spread their aggression to the rest of Europe."

Over the past three years, she has returned several times to Ukraine, including visiting her home city of Odesa and her adopted city of Kharkiv. There she visited troops on the frontline and was shown how to handle a rocket launcher, machine-gun and other weapons. Elina said Kharkiv was "unrecognisable" from the vibrant city she had known so well as a teenager.

Like every Ukrainian, Elina now hopes for a "fair and just" peace, however difficult that will be to achieve. As for her future, she feels sure it involves time in Ukraine. "I wish I could bring my daughter there," Elina told me. "I wish that as a family we could go back there to see my grandmother. I really wish that one day I can come back to a safe Ukraine, a safe Odesa, a safe Kharkiv. That's my dream, my ultimate dream."

● **Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC** is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft

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