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# Conversation With a Survivor



*(Credit: Antoine Verglas)*

Tony Schiena is a survivor. Well before entering the private sector as head of his company, MOSAIC (Multi Operational Security Agency Intelligence Company), his dynamic record of intelligence and paramilitary work established him as an expert in the field — one who was fortunate enough to take part in world-shaping operations, from working with U.S. Special Forces in Kabul and Afghanistan, with Cambodian Special Forces as they struggled in their border conflict with Thailand, and possibly most notably working as an operative in South Africa, where his work helped to avert an imminent and bloody civil war, and bring about the smooth transition to a new and anti-apartheid government. Most recently, he and MOSAIC offered training and support to the Kurdish Peshmerga in their fight against ISIS in Iraq.

In January, as a British inquiry into the death of Alexander Litvinenko found that the former KGB officer and outspoken Vladimir Putin foe's murder was “probably approved” by the Russian head of state, Schiena issued a statement that not only Litvinenko, but very probably also Litvinenko's benefactor, oligarch Boris A. Berezovsky, was murdered by the same opposition. We seized the moment to have a conversation with Mr. Schiena about his knowledge of that particular incident, as well as about his life and work as an operative in the field, what he has learned about survival, and how he was able to turn that knowledge to his advantage in the private sector.

**InfraGard Magazine:** You have your hands in so many pies, security-wise, it's hard to know where to begin, but for the moment, let's start with the topic at hand, the deaths of Litvinenko and Berezovsky. What did you know about them and how do you believe they were achieved?

**Tony Schiena:** Berezovsky I knew. We helped him in Africa. He only had asylum in three countries on the planet — that was England, Israel and South Africa — being Putin's number-one enemy for an attempted coup on Putin's government and being very outspoken against him. I was around Berezovsky, obviously, a lot. He and I established a very good relationship, and I was actually with Berezovsky, at dinner, the night that Litvinenko was dying. Boris left me with a friend of his at dinner to go to the hospital. He and Litvinenko had a good relationship. Litvinenko helped him. They knew each other for a long time — since the assassination attempt on Boris' life in the '90s.

Litvinenko defied Putin by protecting Boris — by informing him of the fact that the FSB wanted to assassinate him. It wasn't news to him. There were various attempts on his life. Finally, they got [Litvinenko] with the polonium 210. I was around all that at the time.

**IM:** We had the announcement about the British inquiry's

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**findings that Putin “probably approved” the Litvinenko poisoning. It doesn’t look like extradition and prosecution for Lugovoi and Kovtun are too likely. It obviously also brings up the question of what other sort of espionage activity might be taking place in Britain and elsewhere.**

**TS:** The majority of what happens in that world, in that murky world of espionage, is really the turning of foreign agents, or the recruiting of foreign agents — having them spy for your government. They may be working in a position that ... the information. I read at a very, very young age, when I was thrown in the deep end, so to speak, in South Africa, with a pending civil war and right-wing and left-wing groups' craziness, CIA presence. I was placed in those kinds of situations. I understood it from a very young age, and how dangerous it can be, also — the compromising of foreign agents, and the way they're assassinated and made to look like something else. I lost a close friend and mentor in Budapest — again,

made to look like an accident. I think about a year ago in London, an MI6 spy was found in a bag, in his bathtub. And then his whole apartment is strewn with women's clothing, to make it look like he was a cross-dresser. I was on FOX News this morning, and I said to the presenters, 'It's that dirty tactic of accusing someone of being a pedophile, or something like that, to discredit them.' That happens often. At this very minute, there are spies trying to turn other spies. That's the majority of their work.

**IM:** **There's an obvious political dimension to all of this, and I don't want to completely ignore that, but in these pages, what we are chiefly interested in is what you and your folks at MOSAIC deal in, which is awareness and mitigation in the event of such an attack. How can people on the front lines — people in the FBI, say, and first responders as well, prepare for and hope to prevent such an insidious, subversive attack? Intelligence**



*Alexander Litvinenko, former KGB spy and author of the book “Blowing Up Russia: Terror From Within”, is photographed at his home in London. A prime suspect in the killing of Litvinenko says he won't testify as planned at an inquiry into the former Russian spy's death, leading the judge in charge to accuse him of trying to manipulate proceedings. Inquiry counsel Robin Tam says Dmitry Kovtun claims to be bound by obligations of confidentiality to an ongoing Russian investigation He had been due to testify by video link from Russia Monday, July 27, 2015. (AP Photo/Alistair Fuller, File)*

**is the key, obviously, but is there anything else that those in the security professions can do to make themselves more aware and prepared?**

**TS:** There's very little. If you're in the crosshairs of really any country's intelligence organization, your days are pretty much numbered, because you don't know when it's going to come, and how covertly it will come — whether it'll be poisoning in a teapot, like happened with Litvinenko, or a poison-tipped umbrella, or a ballpoint pen. Anthrax. You just don't know.

Someone I knew from all the way back when I started — he, at one stage, warned the FBI, saying, 'There's anthrax on the black market. You'd better buy it up.' And this anthrax strain would lead all the way down to a project that South Africa had, called Project Coast. It was the developing of anthrax, and that ended up on the black market. It ended up being used post-9/11, in

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*Kurdish Peshmerga security forces stand guard on the outskirts of the northern city of Mosul, Iraq. Tony Schiena and his MOSAIC organization assisted the Kurds with training and support as they faced ISIS attackers using mustard gas. (AP Photo, File)*





*Tony Schiena knew Alexander Litvinenko's benefactor, Russian billionaire Boris Berezovsky, who died in 2013, and was with him the night Litvinenko died from radiation poisoning from a lethal dosing of polonium 210. (AP Photo/Sang Tan)*

those letter attacks. So it's heeding those warnings, it's finding correct intelligence that hasn't been tainted — because it's very difficult determining what's been tainted and what hasn't, because tainted intelligence wants to lead you astray, or lead you into a certain direction. It's finding those rival sources, and being able to disseminate good intelligence and understanding it so you can use it. Otherwise, it's very difficult.

Look at the 9/11 attacks. Part of that was not communicating between agencies, or that delivery of intelligence was not exceptionally performed, or ... Maybe three weeks ago, I was in London. The commander of intelligence with Scotland Yard, he's a very good friend, and he and I are both trustees

of an organization that fights human trafficking. We're very close. Even him, he goes, 'It's like the powers that be, the politicians — the hierarchy think that intelligence is just this crystal ball.' It's not, you know — it needs manpower. You can't prevent an attack on London by just trying to pull intelligence out of the sky. You need a million spies on the ground. Then you'd have a better chance. Do we have a budget for that? No.

It's interesting. I'm in places like Erbil, in Iraq — I was recently on the whole ISIS fight. In Erbil, there are tons of cash all over the streets. There are people walking into banks, walking out with duffel bags full of millions of dollars — no one gets hit. No one gets hit because every second or third person's a

spy. That's kind of how it works, there. You don't know who to trust — who's working for the government and who's not. I'm not saying that's a solution; I'm saying that's how it works in Erbil.

**IM: The nature of the Litvinenko attack — the substance used, polonium 210 — its toxicity is so extreme, yet it seems so difficult to detect, even in the tissues and fluids of a victim. It doesn't take much to theoretically kill millions of people with it, and yet it's so hard to detect. It seems like a pretty scary scenario that people could be traveling on board a plane with a quantity of this stuff in their midst without knowing it. Do you know if the TSA has the means to be alerted to something like this?**

**TS:** Are you going to be scanning for radioactivity? In its current form, can you even detect radioactivity? Some of it needs to be oxidized or whatever. All these covert ways that that espionage world works — I recently dealt with chemical weapons in Iraq. Mustard gas — ISIS attacking the Kurds. There was an identifiable chemical WMD. But it was an old weapon. An old weapon was either stockpiled or re-created, or created by ISIS. What happens today is so much more superior and covert. Even the days of the Bulgarian spy who was assassinated in London — it was a Bulgarian dissident of the communist regime, and he got executed by the Bulgarian secret service. That was an umbrella that embedded a minute pinhead — and that pinhead had holes in it. Those holes were sealed by some sort of a membrane that would, over time, release that poison. That's how many years ago? Where we are now is completely beyond, capability-wise. How are you going to detect that? If you're traveling with it? Very difficult. And those who are smarter are just going to make it in country anyway, and will have access to do that.

I reiterate — if you're in the crosshairs

of any intelligence organization, you've got a problem. Because sooner or later, if they really want to get to you, they're going to get to you. I have friends, colleagues, associates who I still talk to, who live from hotel to hotel. They're still completely paranoid about this, because they've made enough enemies, within or from the outside. That's that murky world, where they did really massive things. They were dangerous. Now they're older, and they still fear for their lives.

**IM: So how does one exit the life in the field and transition into the private sector the way you have?**

**TS:** I was very lucky. I was recruited out of college — I didn't know what I was doing. I was thrown in the deep end. I was dealing between national intelligence services, CIA and just somehow managed to survive all of that craziness, and the crazy positions I was put into, basically. When a change of government happened, I had the best exit strategy, because with the new government in place, everything that we did was destroyed, anyway. What we did back then is something I'm also very proud of. Probably in the most minute way, personally, we helped avert a civil war, and [effected] a smooth transition of government. If it wasn't for the intelligence agencies of the time, it could have been a massive civil war. That was something that was very important, but it also allowed an exit, whereas many others didn't have that opportunity to exit and go into the private world.

My dealings with government were so limited and so quick. ... I'm finding that's something intelligence agencies are supposed to take advantage of — people who are ignorant to a point, and really don't understand what they're doing. If I knew the stakes at the time, I probably wouldn't be able to perform, because I was young and dumb, basically. You don't know what the stakes are. You just perform. And when you're educated, it stifles the performance, because you understand

the stakes that are at play, and what could potentially happen to you. So I was able to exit very quickly and cleanly, and without any blood on my hands. And then go into the private industry and make my own choices, and not be directed by any government or any superior officer. As a private entity, I can choose. Just like in Iraq recently, I chose to stick my head out for the Kurds, to help them with this problem with chemical weapons. But in doing so, I completely made enemies out of the Iraqis. And I was dealing with Iraqis at the same time — with higher-ups in the Iraqi government. Because the Iraqis and the Kurds are at odds. Without ISIS as a common enemy, they'd be at war. So I make that decision, not in line with any country's or government's foreign policy.

**IM: As someone who's traveled in hostile territory and lived the threats that an unfriendly foreign power can bring to bear, what are your recommendations for others who might find themselves facing similar threats — threats of kidnapping, perhaps, or worse?**

**TS:** Right off the bat, situational awareness is everything. You need to, firstly, understand the environment that you're walking into. If you're going to walk into a slightly dangerous or hostile environment, when you walk into that country that's maybe dangerous politically or criminally, then you need to be aware of that and walk in with that mindset, knowing that something could potentially happen. ... You can't teach anyone how to survive a kidnapping effectively by just giving them instructions on a list and go, 'A, B and C — this is what you do.' If that's a real threat and they're actually going to kidnap you, there's training involved in how you speak to your kidnappers — the psychology you use. The elements of escape and evasion, and how to defend yourself, and how do you overthrow that enemy if you're trying to escape. That's all training-based stuff. But the logic comes in situational awareness —

not going into certain environments. Where you're staying — how secure is that? Where are the exits? Who knows you're there? Make sure the right people do know you're there. What are your movements? Let them understand your movements — someone you can trust, like the embassy, etc. If you're there for sensitive business, whatever that may be, there are a lot of things that can help you if that kidnapping's going to take place. That requires training for you to be able to get out of that alive.

**IM: With all of the security situations you deal with around the world, what do you see as the greatest threat to our safety as a nation today?**

**TS:** Within our borders, I would say the lone terrorists. Those who are, maybe, at all mentally unstable, or who are disillusioned — those individuals who have decided to take their cause further, whatever it may be, and have decided that they are now ISIS. They are part of a bigger thing, then go and commit these horrendous acts. Because you take an example of a child who gets bullied in school, goes home and takes his dad's gun and goes and shoots his classmates — which is what happens, quite often. Now that same mentality when it comes to adults, when they can suddenly now belong to something — something greater. They have a greater cause, and now carry out these lone terrorist attacks. I think, for example, al Qaeda — you don't just pop up and say you're al Qaeda. There was more of some semblance of a process of becoming that, where it seems like ISIS, suddenly I believe in making the entire world fall under Sharia law, that's it, and now I'm going to go and kill a non-believer. I think that is one of the greatest threats within our borders. Whether we destroy that Caliphate or not, they're here to stay. And if we completely destroy them, there'll be another offshoot of them. Terrorism is here to stay. We're going to have to deal with it in our lifetime and beyond. That's just it. ■■