

Citizenfour's Escape to Freedom in Russia

Exclusive: An international community of resistance has formed against pervasive spying by the U.S. National Security Agency with key enclaves in Moscow (with NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden) and in London (with WikiLeaks' Julian Assange), way stations visited by ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

In early September in Russia, National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden told me about a documentary entitled "Citizenfour," named after the alias he used when he asked filmmaker Laura Poitras to help him warn Americans about how deeply the NSA had carved away their freedoms.

When we spoke, Snowden seemed more accustomed to his current reality, i.e., still being alive albeit far from home, than he did in October 2013 when I met with him along with fellow whistleblowers Tom Drake, Coleen Rowley and Jesselyn Radack, as we presented him with the Sam Adams Award for Integrity in Intelligence.

A year ago, the four of us spent a long, relaxing evening with Snowden and sensed his lingering wonderment at the irony-suffused skein of events that landed him in Russia, out of reach from the U.S. government's long arm of "justice."

Six days before we gave Snowden the award, former NSA and CIA director Michael Hayden and House Intelligence Committee chair Mike Rogers had openly expressed their view that Snowden deserved to be on the "list," meaning the "capture or kill" list that could have made Snowden the target of a drone strike. When I asked him if he were aware of that recent indignity, he nodded yes with a winsome wince of incredulity.

This September, there was no drone of Damocles hanging over the relaxed lunch that the two of us shared. There were, rather, happier things to discuss. For example, I asked if he were aware that one of his co-workers in Hawaii had volunteered to Andy Greenberg of Forbes Magazine that Snowden was admired by his peers as a man of principle, as well as a highly gifted geek.

The co-worker told Greenberg: "NSA is full of smart people, but Ed ... was in a class of his own. I've never seen anything like it. ... He was given virtually unlimited access to NSA data [because] he could do things nobody else could."

Equally important, the former colleague pointed out that Snowden kept on his

desk a copy of the U. S. Constitution to cite when arguing with co-workers against NSA activities that he thought might be in violation of America's founding document. Greenberg's source conceded that he or she had slowly come to understand that Snowden was trying to do the right thing and that this was very much in character, adding, "I won't call him a hero, but he's sure as hell no traitor."

Snowden spoke of his former co-workers with respect and affection, noting that most of them had family responsibilities, mortgages, etc. burdens he lacked. He told me he was very aware that these realities would make it immeasurably more difficult for them to blow the whistle on NSA's counter-Constitutional activities, even if they were to decide they should. "But somebody had to do it," said Snowden in a decidedly non-heroic tone, "So I guess that would be me."

Following the intelligence world's axiom of "need-to-know," Snowden had been careful to protect his family and Lindsay Mills, his girlfriend, by telling no one of his plans. I found myself thinking long and hard at how difficult that must have been to simply get out of Dodge without a word to those you love.

Perhaps he felt Mills would eventually understand when he explained why it was absolutely necessary in order to achieve his mission and have some chance of staying alive and out of prison. But, not having discussed with her his plans, how could he be sure of that?

And so, learning recently of the interim "happy-ending" arrival of Mills in Russia was like a shot in the arm for me. I thought to myself, it *is* possible to do the right thing, survive and not end up having to live the life of a hermit. Equally important, that reality is now out there for the world to see. What an encouragement to future whistleblowers and to current ones, as well, for that matter.

Snowden was delighted when I told him that Bill Binney, the long-time and highly respected former NSA technical director, had just accepted the Sam Adams Award, which will be presented in 2015. It was Snowden's own revelations that finally freed up Binney and other courageous NSA alumni to let the American public know what they had been trying, through official channels, to tell the overly timid representatives in Washington.

Seeing 'Citizenfour'

Snowden was happy to tell me about the documentary, "Citizenfour," explaining that during his sessions in Hong Kong with Laura Poitras, Glenn Greenwald, and *The Guardian's* Ewen MacAskill, Poitras seemed to have the camera always rolling during the eight days they shared in Hong Kong including during the grand escape

from the hotel. With a broad smile, Snowden said, "Ray, when people see my makeshift disguise, well, it is going to be really hard to argue that this thing was pre-planned!"

All I have seen so far is the trailer, but I have tickets for a showing Friday night when "Citizenfour" opens in Washington and other cities. With Snowden, I figured I could wait to witness the grand escape until I saw the film itself, so I avoided asking him for additional detail. Like: "Don't spoil it for me, Ed."

I was encouraged to read, in one of the movie reviews, that the documentary does allude to the key role played by Julian Assange and WikiLeaks in enabling Snowden's escape. I had long since concluded that WikiLeaks's role and that of Sarah Harrison, in particular, was *the sine qua non* for success. I hope "Citizenfour" gives this key part of the story the prominence it deserves.

I feel it is an equal honor to spend time with Julian Assange in the Ecuadorian embassy whenever I'm in London. In early September, Assange was a welcoming host and we had a long chat over dinner while I was en route to Russia via London and Berlin. (I had been invited to present at the U.S.-Russia Forum in Moscow later last month and stayed there an extra day in order to visit with Snowden.)

I had been unaware of "Citizenfour" before visiting Assange. The film came up spontaneously when I volunteered to him that the safe extrication of Snowden from Hong Kong sits atop my gratitude list of the many things he has accomplished. That drew a very broad smile and some words about the world's most powerful country and intelligence service, "and we still got him out!"

Assange shared how important it was not only to rescue Snowden himself but, in so doing, to provide for potential whistleblowers some real-life proof that it is possible to do the right thing and avoid spending decades in prison where WikiLeaks' most famous source Chelsea Manning now sits. This was among the main reasons why WikiLeaks cashed in so many chips in its successful effort to bring Snowden to safety. It was surely not because Assange expected Snowden to share reportable information with WikiLeaks. He gave none.

Assange was in good spirits and hoping for some break in the Kafkaesque situation in which he has found himself for several years now (receiving asylum in Ecuador's Embassy to avoid arrest in Great Britain and extradition to Sweden for questioning regarding alleged sexual offenses).

A Stop in Berlin

I also planned to spend a few days in Berlin to coincide with the NATO summit in Wales (Sept. 4-5). On Aug. 30, the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity sent a Memorandum to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, warning her about the

dubious “intelligence” adduced to blame Russia for the troubles in Ukraine. Our memo had some resonance in German and other European media, but I was saddened to find the media in the UK and Germany as co-opted and Putin-bashing as the U.S. media.

It was 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. What I said in my various talks and interviews on NATO’s reneging on its promise to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev not to move NATO one inch eastward, once Germany was reunited, seemed to come as a major revelation to most listeners.

“Really?” was the predominant reaction when I explained that 25 years ago there was a unique, realistic chance for a Europe “whole and free” (in words then used by President George H. W. Bush and Gorbachev) from Portugal to the Urals. Instead, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia was excluded. NATO crept steadily east toward Russia’s border.

And last February, the U.S. and EU orchestrated a coup d’État in Kiev to foster Ukraine’s “European aspirations” to cast its lot with the West and dislodge itself from Russia’s sphere of influence. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Whys Behind the Ukraine Crisis.”](#)]

The squandering of a historic chance for lasting peace in Europe remains atop the list of severe disappointments encountered during my professional life. The fact that, to this day, so few seem aware of what happened, and who was and is to blame, is also a major frustration.

In Berlin, consolation and affirmation came in renewing friendships there and getting to know others many of them expatriates. First and foremost among the latter is Sarah Harrison, the main figure in executing WikiLeaks’s plan to get Snowden out of Hong Kong and onward to Latin America via Moscow, where his planned journey has so far stalled.

Because the U.S. Justice Department charged Snowden with espionage and the U.S. State Department revoked his passport, his stay in Moscow ended up being quite a long one. But Harrison stayed on for as long as seemed necessary to accompany and support Snowden, as well as to be able to testify to the fact that the Russians were not using anything like “enhanced interrogation techniques” on him.

I had last seen Harrison in Moscow at the Sam Adams Award presentation to Snowden; it was great to have a chance to chat with her over a long lunch.

Flying home from Moscow, having had lunch there with Edward Snowden, lunch in Berlin with Sarah Harrison, and dinner with Julian Assange in that little piece of Ecuadorian territory in London, what came first to mind was Polonius’s advice

to Laertes: "Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel."

But then, above the din of the jet engines, came a more familiar and more insistent voice. It was that of Jane Fahey, my Irish grandmother, who for some reason seemed 33,000 feet closer than usual: "Show me your company, and I'll tell you who you are!" she would say, often very often. I think my grandmother would be as pleased with my "company" as I am and as grateful.

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