

The Metro Section

The New York Times



Don Regan/Charles/The New York Times

Robert H. Silberberg of Forensic Investigative Associates Inc. trying an ID scanner, with a colleague, Michael T. Chan. Mr. Silberberg was a prosecutor.

Fear Feeds Bull Market In Private Security

After Sept. 11, Former Law Enforcers See a Surge in Demand for Their Skills

By AL BAKER

A year ago, things at Robert H. Silberberg's private investigative and security company on Third Avenue were, if occasionally exotic, still fairly predictable.

Sure, there was the new Eastern European government that wanted help tracking down the tens of millions of dollars that a deposed sultan might have buried in offshore accounts. But mostly there were jobs like helping the Tunnel nightclub keep drugs off its dance floor.

Today, the calls won't stop. There are the fashion companies trying to figure out how to stay safe in Milan and on Seventh Avenue. There is the worried woman in Brooklyn who wants to know if Mr. Silberberg can check out the Arab-American boyfriend of her best friend. There is the private elementary school in southern Florida that wants to make sure outsiders stay out.

In the post-Sept. 11 world, the questions are as earnest as they are frenzied: Can you make me safe? How fast can it be done? Should we open our mail? What's the next threat?

Mr. Silberberg, a compact, sturdily built career law enforcer who was enterprising enough to set up a bit of a boutique shop in the world of high-end security over the past four years, is the face of an

industry transformed. Security is not only serious business now. It is a very lucrative one.

No downturn appears on the horizon for businessmen like Mr. Silberberg, distinguished by titles that begin with the word former — as in former chief or commissioner. Stock in security companies is rising on Wall Street as other investments plummet.

So, over the next months, the former chiefs stand to profit from the steep uptick in an estimated \$100 billion security industry in the United States. And they get a bonus: the satisfaction of helping to calm the worries of the newly fretful, just the kind of public service they are used to.

"Before you would do the job and think, 'Yeah, it's great to keep out intruders,'" said Mr. Silberberg, who is the president of the United States offices of Forensic Investigative Associates Inc., which also has branches in Russia, Canada, France, Cyprus and Britain. "But now it's taken on a new sense of urgency because of the atmosphere."

Meaning if people used to prefer their security in moderation ("What's the worst that can happen?" some employer would ask Mr. Silberberg, "Crank calls? Burglar in the office?"), suicide pilots and anthrax have spurred a yen for



Continued

Fear Feeds a Boom in Private Security

Continued From Page 1

excess. If people used to look askance at the spy gadgets peddled by security professionals, they can't wait to buy them now.

Mr. Silbering, 54, used to be the city's special narcotics prosecutor. He still lunches with his former boss, District Attorney Robert M. Morgenthau of Manhattan, and is on a first-name basis with some of Gotham's most storied law enforcers of the past half-century.

Even in Mr. Silbering's own building, on 780 Third Avenue at 49th Street, where Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton has offices two floors above his, security has tightened. Employees must show photo ID cards to a private guard, something unheard of before.

Before Sept. 11, annual spending on private security was projected to be \$104 billion by last year, according to the American Society for Industrial Security, a nonprofit professional group with 32,000 members. The society says that the industry outspends public law enforcement and employs more people.

A 1991 report by the National Institute of Justice, "Private Security: Patterns and Trends," predicted growth in the industry, measured in eight categories that encompassed alarms, armored car services, guards, private investigators and even locksmiths. The study said more than one million people would hold security jobs by 2000; experts say Sept. 11 will lead to higher numbers.

"From the largest firms right on down to the smallest corner businesses, they are asking themselves, 'Are we safe?'" said David B. Sandler, the director of strategic planning for the Security Industry Association, a nonprofit trade group.

The industry sometimes has security problems of its own. Just last year, for instance, Argenbright Holdings Ltd., then the corporate parent of Argenbright Security Inc., which is the largest provider of airport security personnel in the country, was fined \$1.2 million for hiring convicted felons to screen passengers at

Philadelphia International Airport.

The ethics of other security providers have been questioned lately by those who wonder if they have been too quick to cash in on the paranoia.

One trip to Mr. Silbering's office and that fear becomes palpable. The phones are ringing off the hook. His secretaries are working nights. Mr. Silbering glides from call to call, a can of Coca-Cola in his right hand, the phone in his left and a case file under his arm. Friends say he was born for this kind of dogged work.

"He is a natural, he really is, in being able to solve security and fraud issues in an innovative way," said Mario A. Possamai, a former investigative journalist who runs the Canadian office of Forensic Investigative Associates in Toronto. "He has an amazing memory."

Mr. Silbering's biography started in the Bronx: he is the son of a garment worker who never made much money. "I was a street kid," he said. "I spent more time out of class than in class."

But he was fascinated by stories about notorious crimes. He went to Brooklyn Law School, was hired in 1974 by Frank S. Hogan, the legendary Manhattan district attorney, went to the Office of Special Narcotics in 1984, and left public life in 1997. Today, on the wall of his 24th-floor office is a photograph of Mr. Silbering with 3,000 pounds of seized cocaine. He has fought the war on drugs, he said, and now it is time to fight the war on terrorism.

Last week, the Midtown offices of a foreign bank called Mr. Silbering to ask if it had the right emergency entry and exit plans. There are nervous queries about gas masks, mailrooms and the handling of packages.

If Mr. Silbering can comprehend the concerns on a business level, he can also understand them on a personal one. "My daughter was in there when this thing happened," said Mr. Silbering. His daughter, Jill, 23, was on the 46th floor of 2 World Trade Center when the first plane hit the other tower. She made it out alive, but two worrisome hours passed before he learned she was safe.

His friend John P. O'Neill, the for-

mer special agent in charge of the national security division in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's New York office, was there, too. Mr. O'Neill retired in August and became head of security at the World Trade Center, where he was killed in the Sept. 11 attack. The death has personalized Mr. Silbering's mission.

As Mr. Silbering spoke, the phone in his office rang. It was Michael T. Chan, a colleague, calling about a meeting with some people who were demonstrating a machine that reads bar codes on the backs of driver's licenses or state ID cards. As quick as he hung up, Mr. Silbering picked up the phone again to set up a meeting with a Fortune 500 clothing company to do an audit.

He used to work mostly as a kind of investigative lawyer, helping companies squelch fraud, theft, bribery and money laundering. His firm is considered an expert on global intelligence, financial background checks of deposed leaders, and cigarettes sold on the black market. But since Sept. 11, more and more clients want security audits, better ID card systems, the protection of software or information on how someone breached a company's security checkpoints. Mr. Silbering is girding for questions about air quality.

As he spoke, the phones rang again. This time it was John Blaha, a former supervisor in the New York office of the F.B.I., who is director of corporate security at Quest Diagnostics Inc., in New Jersey. The language the two men speak sounds like a secret code. All they will say for the record is that they are collaborating on issues of mutual interest, whatever that means.

So where is all this planning for the unimaginable headed? How long will the new emphasis on security last?

"Six weeks ago, the furthest thing from anyone's mind was setting up security systems for opening mail," Mr. Silbering said. "So who knows? The problem with planning the next step is you don't know what the next step is going to be."