

'Follow my voice. Come to the light'

After Chris Hadej safely made it down from the 82nd floor of the World Trade Center, the first tower collapsed and everything around him went dark. "I thought: *So this is what death looks like?*"

"*Swoo-oooh-oooh.*" To Chris Hadej, a transport analyst for the state of New York, that was what it sounded like when the first plane hit Tower 1 of the World Trade Center. "It lasted two seconds at most. I instantly felt the entire building rock forward and back again. I was sitting with my back to the window and saw my coworkers thrown to the floor. Stacks of paper were swept off desks; file cabinets swayed. I stood up to look out the window, which didn't have a single crack in it, by the way. The scene resembled a ticker parade as tons of paper, bits of metal and shards of glass fluttered down. Instinctively, I moved away from the window, dropped to the floor and started to crawl toward the middle of the office."

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Hadej reported to work at 7:30 as usual on the 82nd floor of Tower 1, just eight floors below the point where the plane would strike. He can still clearly recall the events from the moment of impact, partly because he was inspired a few weeks later to write a detailed account of his memories of that day. "I knew they would not stay as vivid," he said in his current office, located several streets away from Ground Zero.

By chronicling his experiences, Hadej knows that the lights in his office on the 82nd floor were still on shortly after the impact, for example. The hallways were dark, however, and began to fill with smoke. Even so, there was no panic at that stage. "We reported to our floor's reception area, just as we had done during the numerous fire drills that were conducted in the wake of earlier attacks on the World Trade Center in 1993. We waited there for further instructions."

They came from the depths of the dark hallway. "'Follow my voice,' I heard a coworker call out repeatedly. 'Follow my voice!' He was in the hallway next to the door to the emergency exits. We quickly made our way to where he was standing. Later we would discover that three coworkers had decided at that point to stay behind."

Hadej and his coworkers began descending the stairs, taking them at a good clip but without breaking into a run. When they got below the 70th floor, however, they found themselves in a human traffic jam. "You couldn't move. I remember we let two people go past us. They were hysterical and it was the only way we could escape their screams."

No one knew exactly what was going on at that moment except that "a plane" had hit the building and that it was pretty much certain that it had not been an accident. "Cell phones weren't working but some people had walky-talkies that they were using to communicate with the authorities. Rumors spread quickly in the stairwell; supposedly even the White House had been hit, too. I thought: *I'll find out the real story once I get home.* Looking back, that must have been when the second plane hit Tower 2. We didn't hear or feel it, though."

After a while, the first injured victims began to appear. "One man was completely burned from the waist down. A woman, also covered with burns, walked like a mummy as she passed, arms painfully extended in front of her. My boss guided her down the stairs."

After they passed the 40th floor they encountered the first group of firefighters going up. "That was about 45 minutes after the plane hit. They already looked exhausted, which was totally understandable; I mean, they had climbed more than 30 flights of stairs in full gear and were loaded down with equipment. The man leading the way looked like he could drop dead any second."

Finally they were able to pick up the pace a little once they reached the 12th floor. Together with two office mates—Jan and Larisa, Hadej made it down the final stairs, which were soaking wet. It had taken an hour and 10 minutes to reach the bottom. Relieved, the three walked down the concourse, the underground corridor that connected the two towers. Aside from the fact that all of the stores were closed everything looked normal and intact. Then Hadej heard a noise that sounded sickeningly similar to the earlier "swoo-oooh-oooh," followed by a rumbling that drowned out everything else. Tower 2 had fallen.

"The collapsing building sent a wall of air and debris through the concourse that came at us like a tsunami. Jan and Larisa dove to the floor and I ran for cover against the marble pillar between Sephora and Banana Republic. The shattered glass from the store windows flew through the air. I was literally sandblasted by the violent drafts of air filled with fiberglass particles. Each time I tried to breathe my mouth filled with sand. Then the power went off and we were plunged into total darkness. I thought: *So this is what death looks like?*"

Within a couple of minutes, Hadej found that he was able to breathe again. In the distance he could see a faint light: the entrance to the subway. He could hear Jan moaning quietly; the force of the explosion had sent him and Larisa flying across the floor. Jan had lost his glasses and could barely see without them. Larisa had sustained a minor injury to her leg. Linking arms, the three staggered toward the subway, only to find more billowing clouds of smoke. They were forced to turn around.

Suddenly they heard a voice calling. "Come to the light!" Heads swiveling, they heard it again. "Come to the light!" Eventually they were able to locate the source: a policeman with a flashlight, who pointed the way to the street. Although they had made it outside, they were not out of harm's way: three blocks away, Tower 1 came crashing down. Instead of pausing to watch, the three took off running. "We didn't stop until

we knew we were safe. When Jan brought up the 35 firefighters who had passed us in the stairwell, we all just burst into tears.”

They were unbelievably lucky, Hadej knows. “As it turned out, the first plane accelerated at the last minute, which increased its altitude and avoided hitting the 82nd floor. And as awful as it was in the concourse, what if we had been faster, or slower for that matter? The people ahead of us in the concourse died. But if it had taken us longer to get out, we would have been buried by the other tower. The 25 minutes between the two collapses were exactly how much time we needed to survive.”