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Two Earthquakes, One Rescue Worker Memories from Beneath the Rubble

September 19, 1985

On September 18, 1985 at almost midnight, Gerardo Rivera and I left the offices of Brigadas de Rescate del Socorro Alpino (Alpine Search and Rescue Brigades) at 80 San Juan de Letrán Avenue.¹ Probably, due to the late hour, we wouldn't find any way to get to the southern part of the city, so we decided to tell the building's porter, "Blondie," that if we couldn't find a collective taxi, we'd be back to spend the night. Fortunately, we found one nearby at Salto del Agua. The next morning we had an appointment with our friend Elsy. She was going to pick us up so we could talk about something on the way to work.

At 7 a.m. we met her and got in her car. We hadn't gone more than a few feet when we felt a strong swaying motion. Used to earthquakes in Mexico City, we paid little attention, but it got stronger and stronger. It wasn't the usual earthquake of only a few seconds. The frenetic movement of telephone poles, wires, cars, and people calmed down little by little. All around us there were frightened people and one or two who were hysterical, but nothing indicated to us the real dimension of what had happened.

We started off again, and, when we got to Taxqueña Boulevard, we found it blocked with cars and buses. When we were able to move ahead a little, we began hearing screams: "The school fell down! Please help!" A school at the corner of Tlalpan Avenue and Miguel Ángel de Quevedo Avenue had collapsed. Fear and anxiety began to take

* Head of brigade, Brigadas de Rescate del Socorro Alpino de México, A.C. (Alpine Search and Rescue Brigades of Mexico). Photos courtesy of the author.

hold. We looked at each other with the same thought: our families! Elsy drove back as far as she could and told us to get out of the car; she would see what she could do to get back home. There was no public transportation, so we ran toward our homes.

When we got to Tlalpan, reality set in: not only the school had collapsed. With adrenaline speeding through our veins, expecting the worst, I thought about my mother, my sister, and my nephews who lived in an unsafe building because it was leaning sideways. But, when we got there, everything was fine. A jeep and a Safari owned by Socorro Alpino were parked there, so we decided to take the Safari to go see how the building on San Juan de Letrán had fared. We took Plutarco Elías Calles Avenue, and then Tlalpan; somehow, we got to Xola Avenue, which is when we could clearly see the effects of the earthquake. People were shouting, "We need help! People are trapped!" Gerardo told me to get out to see how we could help, so I did. I went as far as I could into a collapsed building that smelled strongly of gas. The fire department had arrived and I immediately coordinated with them to go in as far as we could go. The gas made it impossible to use tools, so we made our way as we could through the holes, slowly but surely.

We began to hear the first cries. It was someone who wasn't far away, but it was difficult to get to him because of the amount of debris in front of us that we would have to break apart little by little. Suddenly, we heard shouts from the street: "Come out! Come out! They're going to use heavy machinery." Although slightly injured (the fireman by a metal object, and myself by a piece of glass), we quickly exited the building along with all the others who were giving support in different parts of it. And, yes, outside there were people from the government with heavy machinery saying that they had been ordered to start work. We explained that there were people alive in there and that we weren't going to move. People got very angry, so the newcomers had no alternative but to leave.

We went back into the building by the same route where we had been tunneling to get to where we had heard voices. It was already late when we found them under a slab. A man's voice said, "I'm here with my son. He's alive. I think my wife and my daughter are dead; they're not answering me. I can't move; I'm trapped with something on my leg. Please help us." Underneath us other people were trying to get to them. Among them was a good friend whose last name was García-Moreno, an old

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mountaineer and rescue worker from Socorro Alpino, who lived just across the way, and who had provide the equipment for the rescue.

The trapped man said, "Please, water. I need water for my son." There was still a little way to go before we got to them, but I had an idea. It was hard, but we did what we could and were able to push through a little tube that the father managed to take hold of. I had to take the water into my mouth and pass it through the tube; little by little, I could feel how the little boy drank it. After a little while, the people working from below were finally able to make contact. The father had a beam on his leg and the little boy was unhurt. Unfortunately, the mother and little girl had died. The doctors did a quick assessment and decided that the father's leg had to be amputated on site. I continued working until nightfall, getting bodies out with the rescue teams and volunteers, who were incredibly well organized.

Afterward, I walked down Xola Avenue to San Juan de Letrán Avenue. I was sure that the personnel would be concentrated at the building where Socorro Alpino offices were. I tried phoning, but the telephone lines weren't working. As I moved ahead, I found out what was going on through people's comments, and, boy, it was really serious. I didn't have enough money to take a taxi, but I stopped one anyway. As soon as I explained who I was and where I urgently needed to get, the driver said to forget about the cost. When we got to Salto del Agua, we could go no further, so I got out. It was very strange to see the street covered in dust, with yellow lights everywhere, the sound of sirens, people walking like automatons, the anguish on their faces. I still didn't fully understand the magnitude of the disaster.

I got to the door of the building where my colleagues were and found it all out: people were working at the Super Leche Café, at a nearby parking lot where one person was trapped, at the Regis Hotel, at the Medical Center, at the General Hospital, and at other points around the city. Right away, I offered my assistance so they would

tell me where to go. We were completely in the dark, literally. All the walls of the building had fallen down and one whole part of the building that faced Vizcaínas Street had collapsed. I felt a chill through my whole body; ten minutes were the difference in whether Gerardo and I were alive or dead: if we hadn't gotten the collective taxi the night before, we would have been under the rubble of our beloved, emblematic building.

That same night, our friend José Ponce asked for help because his nephews had been trapped in the Chapultepec University, at Xalapa and Chihuahua Streets. We got a group together and went. Machinery, rescue workers, and volunteers worked ceaselessly until we found them. Unfortunately, though, they had died, like most of the students. Right then, we heard another piece of news: the son of a friend and old Socorro Alpino patrolman was trapped in the Juárez Hospital. Even though we did an exhaustive search, we never found the little boy.

Dawn was approaching, and with it, a new reality. The authorities' desperation at the magnitude of the disaster was tangible. The country's impotence and lack of preparation for this kind of situation was grave; however, wherever there was a collapsed building, the populace was there supporting rescue squads. While some worked with tools on top of the piles of the fallen buildings to open a tunnel, others formed human chains to remove the materiel. Natural leaders were born immediately, taking command. At different points of the city, community members had organized to set up tents where they offered people food, water, clothing, shoes, personal hygiene products, etc.: the donation centers.

One night, three or four days later, we went to San Camilito, a building that had collapsed behind the Garibaldi Plaza. Several of us from Socorro Alpino, among them the brothers Jesús and Alejandro Torres Cid, went together. The structure was seriously dangerous: the cistern on the roof was leaning sideways and about to fall; therefore, you had to step very carefully. Suddenly, we heard a sound like a cat meowing and we all stopped to listen.

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We talked it over and decided that Jesús would go in. It was a little girl, who we were able to get out alive after hours of work, although unfortunately, the rest of her family had died.

I could tell many other stories of life, suffering, disappointments, and joy, but it would be impossible to tell them in just a few lines. After almost two months, each of us began to go back to his life, although many of us were dubbed "abandoned patrolmen."

The president of Socorro Alpino at that time, Miguel Cuevas Arechavala, called those of us who had participated in the rescue efforts to be honored in the National Palace. The invitation was from then-President Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado. A large number of people, rescue groups, and political and other public figures congregated in the building's central patio, where we received the September 19 Humanitarian Aid Award. When we went out onto the street again, we still felt pain and frustration, but also admiration for an entire people who, from September 19 and 20 on, had shown the world what solidarity, teamwork, and brotherhood meant.



The Alpine Search and Rescue Brigade Mexico (Brigada de Rescate del Socorro Alpino de México, A.C. [Socorro Alpino])



Foundation: Socorro Alpino was founded by Alfredo Insunza Ortiz in 1946, to answer the need for an institution that would offer safety and surveillance for Mexican and international mountaineers visiting Mexico's highest peaks.

Structure: A non-profit organization, it has a board of directors, members, and active personnel organized in patrols. More than 100 of its volunteers live in Mexico City, and approximately 60 more members are organized in four sections in the states of Puebla and Veracruz.

Social Objective and Mission: To support society altruistically in matters of security and accident prevention through our members' specialized training in search, salvage, and rescue.

Vision: To be the nationally and internationally most widely recognized organization for its professionalism, guided by fraternalism and a vocation for service.

Field of Action: Year round, we carry out security work in the Iztaccíhuatl-Popocatepetl National Park and the Orizaba Peak National Park. If the authorities require it, we also offer occasional support in the Nevada de Toluca area or other mountainous regions.

Coordination with the Authorities: The Brigada de Rescate del Socorro Alpino de México is listed on the Registry of Volunteer Groups, part of the Ministry of the Interior and Mexico City's National Civil Protection System, and therefore lends support to federal, state, and municipal authorities.

Participation: After the September 19, 1985 earthquake, Socorro Alpino participated for more than two months in search, salvage, and rescue efforts to find victims trapped in collapsed structures. The work was done at different points throughout Mexico City: the Super Leche Café, the building where seamstresses were trapped, the Regis Hotel, the Tlatelolco Housing Project, the Medical Center, the General Hospital, the San Camilito Market, the Chapultepec University, the Downtown Juárez Hospital, as well as at many other buildings like schools, businesses, and hotels along Tlalpan Boulevard. After the September 2017 earthquakes, it participated in work at the Tlalpan Housing Project and the Enrique Rébsamen School, above all collecting donations, managing and transporting goods and tools to disaster sites by motorcycle and cyclist brigades. Its members also did rescue work in the boroughs of Xochimilco and Tlalpan. **MM**

September 19, 2017

At 10 a.m., several of us from Socorro Alpino were gathered in front of the Torre Mayor (Great Tower) on Reforma Avenue. We were waiting to participate with the Reforma Corridor and Historic Center September 19 Association in the huge earthquake drill scheduled to commemorate the 32 years since the first great quake, like we do every year. Our specific function in the event was to support the internal Civic Protection unit and monitor everyone who was slated to come out onto the street and move toward their designated meeting places.

As planned, at 11 a.m., the seismic alarm sounded and part of the building began to evacuate; only the people on the lower floors actually exited the buildings, and the others concentrated in pre-established security spaces. It all went off without a hitch. Socorro Alpino personnel were stationed at the exits to give directions, making sure there were no accidents, though we were prepared with two ambulances and an emergency vehicle. The police had already stopped traffic. So, little by little, that big avenue filled up with hundreds, if not thousands, of people.

The activity concluded around 12 noon, and everyone began to return to their workplaces, guests to hotels, etc. My colleagues and I said goodbye, and everyone went on his/her way. I got on my bicycle and pedaled toward the Chabacano area. When I arrived at San Antonio Abad Boulevard, I crossed through the tunnel. When I emerged, I had to hold onto the railing because I couldn't stand up. The earthquake had begun and the seismic alarm sounded a few seconds later. The force of the shaking was increasing. All there was left to do was to protect yourself and observe people who were already hysterical, even though around us there were no mishaps.

I got home and all my neighbors were out on the street. Suddenly someone came running to say that a building near the subway station had collapsed. Since I had my safety gear with me, I got back on my bicycle and headed there. Perhaps 30 minutes had gone by since the earthquake and the police had already surrounded the place. I identified myself so they would let me cross their barrier. I noticed that only one floor had collapsed. The firefighters were already there and someone—I imagine he was the boss—asked for support in entering the building to inspect it and make sure no one was trapped or injured inside. They made it to the last floor, taking special

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care with the floor that had collapsed. Once they had finished their inspection, the fire official declared an all-clear.

In contrast with the 1985 earthquake, when the information came out in dribs and drabs, whether by word of mouth, on TV news, or by telephone once the service was operating again, the effects of the 2017 earthquake were more widely disseminated. On Facebook, WhatsApp, and other social media, we were alerted to what was going on in different parts of the city and about the help required.

Little by little, the sound of ambulance sirens increased and I realized that most of them headed for the southern part of the city. We Socorro Alpino members communicated with each other by WhatsApp, where we formed a chat. That's how we found out that a building had collapsed near the side-road of the Miguel Alemán Viaduct. I corroborated the information and went there.

Just like on San Antonio Abad Avenue, the police had already put up a barrier. Once again, like in 1985, I realized that local inhabitants had taken over and were in control. Hundreds of people had already gathered there and, even though it was very difficult, I managed to climb to the very top of the concrete and steel rod pile. Human chains were already organized taking materiel away in buckets or by hand. Some people had found tools and were breaking up the concrete blocks. Others installed a watering post. Unfortunately, there was a moment when the situation got out of control. I identified a person wearing a Civil Protection uniform and suggested that he apply the protocols that existed for exactly this kind of situation. His answer was clear: "They just pay no attention to me."

I went to Tlalpan and when I entered the area I could see that things were the same. There were too many people working or trying to work. I found other members of Socorro Alpino who had already transported some injured in their ambulances and were not supporting the manoeuvres, together with other rescue groups and members of civil society.

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The Socorro Alpino operational chief gave instructions through a WhatsApp chat asking us to get our equipment and gather. They instructed us to go to the Tlalpan Housing Project, where we organized to participate in the rescue efforts together with people who were already there. Meanwhile, more colleagues and civilians continued arriving at the Socorro Alpino installations.

Later that night, we got to the housing project buildings and identified ourselves. We could hear how a military commander, without knowing who we were, was arguing with one of the firefighters, asking him to bring his personnel down from the pile of rubble. The firefighter said he couldn't because they were working, and the military man responded, "You bring them down or I will." He turned around and saw me and asked me how he could be of service. We identified ourselves and said that we had all the equipment necessary to get to work. He asked us to go to the tent a few feet away so that Civil Protection could put us on a list. Since we could see that there were already too many groups and volunteers, we opted to go to the Enrique Rébsamen School in Villa Coapa.

We arrived near dawn at a place that looked like a bunker. Soldiers, federal police, rescue groups, journalists, and volunteers made access almost impossible, but we managed to get to the command headquarters. We talked there with the person directing activities to offer our services, explaining what we had with us to help. He politely said that everything was under control. A person dressed in civilian clothing shouted at us, "The only thing you're going to do is get in the way!" The atmosphere was tense.

Adrián Alba, a paramedic with the Mexican Red Cross and member of Socorro Alpino, took it upon himself to organize a donation center in the Múzquiz Garden, located at the corner of Álvaro Obregón and Cuauhtémoc Avenues; this center was widely disseminated on social media. Large amounts of shovels, pick-axes, first-aid and personal hygiene materiel, tents, sleeping bags, clothing, etc., arrived there. A coordinator was appointed who organized everything correctly and set up a table to deal with requests



for materiel. To have a log of what was given out, they created a list with the item distributed, the name of the person who received it, and the place it was being sent.

Two days after the earthquake, that donation center was one of the largest, and it began to receive requests to send materiel to other places affected by the September 7 earthquake in Chiapas, Puebla, Oaxaca, and Morelos. Applicants were told they had to give the name of the driver, his/her driver's license number, the license plate number of the vehicle the aid would be transported in, destination, etc. They also created a WhatsApp group where people were asked to show that the materiel had been delivered. About 40 motorcyclists joined the donation center. If support was requested on social media for a certain area, a motorcyclist would go out to corroborate the information; once that was done, a larger group would immediately go out. They also lent support when a specific medication or materiel needed to be sent elsewhere. A group of bicyclists also joined in, doing almost exactly the same thing. Thanks to the Zello digital app, we were able to turn our cell phones into walkie-talkies, facilitating communication immensely. One *compañero* did nothing but take aid requests 24 hours a day. ■■■

Notes

¹ For more about this institution, see its website, <http://www.socorroalpino.org.mx/>. San Juan de Letrán Avenue was the name of a segment of a long Mexico City boulevard known today as "Lázaro Cárdenas Avenue." [Editor's Note.]