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## 9/11: TWENTY YEARS ON

On September 11, 2001, Australian Jewish expat Julian Robinson was in one of the Twin Towers when Al-Qaeda struck. Twenty years on, he shares his memories of that fateful day and his thoughts on what's happened since with **Peter Kohn**.

WHAT if September 11, 2001 had been just an ordinary day? "Had there not been an attack, I probably would have been on the phone with colleagues and clients discussing projects ... mergers and acquisitions, private equity," recalled former Sydneysider Julian Robinson.

Instead the expatriate Jewish Australian insurance broker's morning in his New York office inside the World Trade Centre's South Tower was interrupted by colleagues saying the North Tower was on fire and they had to evacuate.

He found himself making his way down several flights of stairs among a sea of office workers. Word was spreading that a plane had flown into the North Tower.

Had 9/11 been just another day on the calendar, his colleague Clarin Shellek Siegel-Schwartz would have answered her emails, made her phone calls and gone on with her work.

"I said, 'I'm leaving now, Clarin, let's go.' And she said, 'Oh, I have just one last email to look at or quick call to make.' I said, 'You can take care of that later.' Those was the last words I said to her."



Julian Robinson.



Smoke billows from the Twin Towers following the attack of September 11, 2001.

Photo: AP Photo/Chap Soel Cheong

Another plane would hit the South Tower and she didn't make it out.

People who reached the bottom of the stairs could see into a plaza that "looked like a war zone ... all kinds of debris had been falling from the building". Robinson and others were directed to a basement shopping concourse but when he eventually emerged onto the street, horrific scenes confronted him.

"By that point, there had been some people jumping from the building to escape the inferno. I can remember seeing some pools of blood on the sidewalk."

Robinson tried to make a phone call to say he was safe but couldn't get through. He headed for his nearby gym to try the phones there and was able to phone friends

who lived near his home on the Upper West Side, who were then able to call his sister in Toronto to let her know he had survived. On TVs at the gym, he joined millions around the world watching the towers collapsing.

"A few people ran in off the street covered in dust. They looked like something out of a horror movie, covered in white ash," he recalled.

Ten years later, on another September 11, the 9/11 Memorial opened in downtown Manhattan. Like millions of others, Robinson has since visited, standing by the memorial pools that mark the footprints of the twin towers.

His voice breaking, he told *The AJN*, "When you close your eyes

and you picture what was there and the huge loss of human life, the terror that was inflicted on New York and the other places ... I didn't know what emotions I expected to feel when I was going to visit lower Manhattan ... remembering colleagues and friends."

Robinson, now 57, is thankful he has been spared nightmares or other post-traumatic symptoms, although the sight of women's high-heeled shoes still reminds him of heaps of shoes he saw abandoned as people tried to make it quickly down the stairs.

He observed, "I'm sparing with letting people know I'm a 9/11 survivor, with publicising that. If asked, I let people know."

On the eve of 9/11's 20th

anniversary, he is dismayed at the way the 20-year US involvement in Afghanistan has ended, and that the Taliban, who harboured Al-Qaeda as it hatched its devastating attacks on the US, is back in power.

"The recent withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan has brought the whole issue of dealing with terrorists front-and-centre again. It has been difficult to watch the major mismanagement of this whole operation. I believe it has resulted in the unnecessary deaths of hundreds of people, Afghan, US and other citizens."

"Personally, it has caused me a lot of stress thinking about how we have essentially gone back to step one, leaving Afghanistan in the hands of known terrorists. The rise of terrorist activity around the world emanating from Afghanistan is as clear as day."

In 2012, Robinson moved from New York to the far quieter city of Sacramento, California, where he feels safer. "I'm sometimes more pessimistic about security around the world ... but hopefully I'm completely wrong."

Robinson spent the 10th anniversary of 9/11 in Sydney with family and friends. Ten years on, COVID restrictions have robbed him of this opportunity. On September 11, a Shabbat, he will be in shule.

"It's going to be right between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which is an intense, hard time on the Jewish calendar. So it will be a day of reflection."




Watch the interview

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9/11 anniversary – Full coverage: **Pages 2-5 & 18**



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