

## Building collapse victim tells of 13-hour ordeal

By Bob Warner

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Many times before, Mariya Plekan had visited the Salvation Army thrift store on Market Street. She liked shopping there because it was a little cheaper than the regular shops.

"I needed to buy something for myself and my relatives," she said in her native Ukrainian in a deposition videotaped last week. "And I had to save money on things."

On June 5, the twice-widowed 52-year-old had a four-hour break from her job as caretaker for an older Ukrainian woman. So she took the SEPTA Route 7 bus from Fairmount to 22d Street and Market.

She was in the middle of the thrift store, looking through clothes, when the building collapsed without warning.

"All of a sudden I heard the noise, and all I had a chance, to turn around and look, and the roof went down," Plekan said

A beam pinned her legs, preventing her from moving, but she kept conscious and could hear rescuers working above her. "They started to move things around, then I had a hope that . . . they will save me shortly. But it didn't happen," she said.

"I was screaming, 'Help, help.' But nobody heard me. And I remember everything . . . heard the barking of the dogs, and I was

screaming constantly. . . . But there was no help coming."

For 13 hours, she remained stuck in the rubble.

"And then I heard, I don't know when. . . . I heard the dog was barking and coming up. And I started to scream 'Help' again, and the dog followed my yell. And the man, I don't know who he is, he said, I heard, that 'there is somebody alive here.' And they started pulling things apart and they pulled me out."

These were her first public comments about the collapse in which six people were killed when the four-story brick wall of an adjacent building under demolition toppled onto the Salvation Army store.

**The 40-minute interview by Plekan's attorney, Andrew J. Stern, was distributed to reporters Monday.**

**Plekan, the most seriously hurt of the 14 injured survivors, was taken immediately to the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, where she has spent most of the last six months. She was discharged recently to a rehabilitation center, Stern said.**

She has undergone a series of operations, including amputation of both legs above the hip. Her medical bills already run well over \$2 million, Stern told reporters. He is representing her in a suit against the Salvation Army, the owners of

the adjacent property, and two demolition contractors, both of whom were charged separately Monday with criminal offenses in the June 5 collapse. Plekan, who lived in Kensington until the accident, came to Philadelphia in 2002 after the death of her first husband in Ukraine, Stern said. She cared for her husband's sick aunt, and then others, and sent money back to Ukraine, where her children, Andrii and Nataliia, had remained. Her son, 26, and her daughter, 25, have spent months in Philadelphia since the building collapse. "Second or third day they were already here," she said. "They were all by my side. It gave me the strength."

She said she worries about her future.

"Every day I have concerns and worry. I think about everything because I have a normal memory and a normal understanding how I am living right now. And every day I understand how hard it is to be without legs. When you cannot take care of yourself, when you constantly depend on other people to take care of you, and I do not know how to live after that because it's so hard for me.

"The doctors say there is no concerns for my life anymore," she said. "But I'm still scared, how am I going to be, how I need the help every day, every second."