

Orek Krakow Survives Treblinka

Bill Craig told me this story in the 1990's about his father, who had an interesting life to say the least. Bill's father, Orek Krakow, was one of the very few that escaped from Treblinka.

The names tell an important part of the story. Orek Krakow was born David Czerniakow in Krakow, Poland. He changed his name to Orek Krakow to camouflage his identity, was renamed to Owen Craig on Ellis Island and finally changed back to Orek Krakow when he made another bit of peace with his past. Bill was always Billy Craig, named for the bialys Orek ate and loved in Bialystok before the ghetto, before Treblinka.

I worked with Bill for years. He was a physician assistant working for the best cardiology group in Western North Carolina. Bill was admired for his knowledge and performance of all the procedures a cardiology PA would typically perform and some only a cardiologist would usually do. Bill was a kind man as well, always friendly, always encouraging. Bill taught me a lot in my work as critical care nurse. Bill read and approved of the book I wrote on EKG interpretation. And Bill had a hidden side. He was a child of holocaust survivors.

Bill's last name had been created for him on Ellis Island. Bill wasn't there, his father Orek was. It was 1947 and Bill's father's recorded name was Orek Krakow and the record showed he had been born in Cracow, Poland and had lived there until 1940. How he came to be on Ellis Island is a very unlikely story. An immigration official gave Orek the new name of Owen Craig. "That's a good American name for you, you poor fellow."

Bill and far less I are not central to this story. Orek Krakow is. Bill was deeply affected by the events I will relate here. I am just the narrator. Bill was a child of holocaust survivors, a proper diagnosis with typical behaviors. I will come to that. It speaks well of Bill that while being deeply affected by his father's experience of the holocaust Bill was a kind and outwardly cheerful man.

Orek Krakow was born in Krakow, Poland, in 1921, to Jewish parents. The family was named Czerniakow and Orek was named David at birth but his parents changed names when they saw what was coming. The family was secular, not observant of the Orthodox routines. They were what are called High Holidays Jews. This made no difference to the Nazis who invaded Poland in September 1939. They were there to kill all Jews and eventually to kill all Poles as well, creating lebensraum, the living space for racially pure Germans to spread out into the nascent empire of the Third Reich. The Nazis were to determine so much of Orek's life and some of Bill's as well.

Orek lived in Cracow until June 1940. He didn't like leaving, he had to leave his elderly parents behind, but it was still permitted for Jews to leave and Orek thought he had better go. The Governor-General of Cracow, Hans Frank, had already instituted repressive and threatening measures in Cracow. Orek thought he would be safer in Bialystok which had not yet had a ghetto declared, so there he went.

He lived there in relative safety until July of 1941 when the Bialystok ghetto was instituted. Conditions were appalling as they were in all ghettos in Poland and Orek suffered as all the Jews suffered but his youth and health helped him endure. Orek's time in the ghetto lasted until August 1943. There was an uprising, a large one, and Orek took part. He and many other Jews, mostly young men, fought the Nazis for three months. Many Jews gave their lives in this hopeless fight, not in hopes of overcoming the Germans, but to die resisting, fighting, instead of in supine resignation. Orek was not one of those killed and he avoided detection as a resister afterward.

That spared him immediate execution but not transport to Treblinka, where he arrived in mid-November 1941. Orek lived there, I should write continued to draw breath, it was not what should ever be called living, for part of a year. It was August 1943. Orek, young and strong, became a sonderkommando. He was forced, of course, and he submitted, of course. He was only human.

That's how it's done.

The three months Orek endured in Treblinka were filled with horror. He went through the steps of grieving for his humanity as he helped Nazis murder his brethren. I will spare the reader. I cannot repeat what I know about what happened there. I know I should but I cannot bear another repetition. If you need to you can read it all here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treblinka_extermination_camp

For me it is enough to say that those three months were enough to make Orek's recovery of any faith in humanity almost impossible.

The Polish winter had come again. It was October 1943. His dream came abruptly. There was only the nothing of exhaustion and despair and then his mother's voice was commanding him. His mother's voice had never commanded, it had always comforted and soothed but now it was strident. "Wake up, wake up, you cannot sleep now, you must hide now!" And the SS men burst in just as Orek had grasped the rope slings he slept atop, now clinging under them and so was unseen. They missed him as they shouted Raus! Raus! Juden Raus! to the other sonderkommandos and they were driven out into the snow. There were gunshots. But the SS had missed him, all thanks to his mother coming in a dream. Orek still lived. For the first time in many months he felt a glimmer of hope. He might survive! But why? For what reason? After all he had seen and been forced to take part in, why would he want to live on?

Even so, he crept in darkness from the hut, to the wire and under it into the surrounding woods. The snow bit at him but he ignored it as he had learned to ignore so much. For good or ill and without clear purpose he had escaped the SS, the Third Reich.

Orek had no faith remaining in his fellow men, not Germans or Poles or even Jews. He had seen them all do the unthinkable to extract a few more days or minutes of continued breathing from what they once had called living. He knew in his bones and blood that man was capable of living without a conscience and he hardly wanted any more of this mockery of life. Even so, the demands of his genes propelled him to keep on living, to eat what he could steal, to avoid capture, to trust nobody. A winter in solitude in Poland is difficult but Orek survived.

He still had his one thing, his remnant of how life could be, he still had his father's gold watch. Amazing that he had kept it! He couldn't even explain how he had done so. Don't ask, don't tell. He still clung to the memory of his mother and father and that would give him a reason to live through this last Polish winter.

It was food stolen from Polish barns, animal feed it was, the animals eaten by the Germans and the Poles eating the feed themselves. The Germans were already fleeing west back to Germany after burning whatever they could, trying to hide what they had done, and Orek could hear the Russian guns nearing. He also walked west, keeping near the Russian guns, already planning his escape from the Russians just as he had escaped the Germans, hoping for the Americans. It worked after a fashion.

He spent a year as a DP, a Displaced Person, in France then processed his way onto a ship to the USA, a long and difficult process it was, so many documents and papers in a new language, all to get to the Goldenh Medineh and the Ellis Island he had been told of before. He memorized the most important new words, Please and Thank you and he still had the watch! and in his year in France, spent with Jewish children survivors he had begun to repair his humanity. The children were scarred of course but had left some of the will to thrive and Orek tried to learn from them.

The voyage from La Havre to New York was uneventful. Of course any situation where there was food and no fear of sudden death would seem uneventful to Orek. They steamed across the Atlantic in an old troop ship, passed the Verrazano Narrows and Orek saw the Statue of Liberty as the ship approached Ellis Island.

It had all been so easy! The Bialystok ghetto had been hard, Treblinka was horrible past imagining, the winter in the woods of Poland not as bad but difficult. Not being shot by the American GIs not so bad, they were looking for DPs as well as renegade SS and Wehrmacht. The

French DP hospital had been a resort in comparison. The North Atlantic had been rough but not life-threatening. Ellis would surely be easy.

Orek didn't know about the medical exam. The long lines, sure, he had been told about them, and about the questions all in English but a medical exam? Why a medical? He was young and strong! Who could think anything was wrong with Orek? But Orek was older and the months in Treblinka and in hiding had aged him. The American doctor tapped his chest and listened with a stethoscope and shook his head. Orek would have to have some kind of picture taken.

The picture was taken, a big machine that made loud noises and Orek waited. The doctor came back into the room where Orek waited carrying a sheet of something with a drawing or something on it and gave Orek a sad look, shaking his head. "I'm sorry Mr. Craig (Orek's new name!) but there's a spot on your lung. You may have tuberculosis. We will have to send you back to France."

This was a supreme moment for Orek. Or was he Owen? So much was changing and so fast but he was certain he must not go back to Europe, the Europe of the war and the holocaust, they were already calling it the shoah. Owen must stay in America where he could live, so he did the only thing he could with the only thing he had left. He took out his watch, his father's watch, pressed it into the doctor's hands and said his new word.

"Please?" That truly was all Owen had left.

The doctor stopped and considered. He was risking his career and his ethics as a servant of public health. He was also a kind man. After a moment he smiled and said "Okay!" and returned the watch to Owen. Owen would stay and become an American. The spot never became tuberculosis. And Owen used his other new word.

"Thank you."

Owen Craig married another shoah survivor, made a troubled marriage, what else after the holocaust, had a son who he named after the rolls he had eaten so long ago in Bialystok and still loved, just as he loved his son Billy. Bill showed me the watch once but I never met Owen. He passed before I met Bill. I did get to hear his story.

The shoah marked Owen and his wife, of course it did, and it marked Bill too. One day in the hospital cafeteria the PAs were kidding Rick, another PA in the group, about his vasectomy which he had had that morning. Bill shook his head in disapproval.

"What, Bill, you don't think Rick should have done it? He already has three children!"

"No, I don't. You can lose everything. They can take your children and your wife and your home and everything else. You must always allow for that." Bill's face was firmly set.