



OBITUARIES

Krzysztof Krawczyński and Elżbieta Gürtler-Krawczyńska

Krzysztof Krawczyński, viral hepatitis expert, and his wife, **Elżbieta Gürtler-Krawczyńska**, cardiologist and radiologist, died in a car crash after a birthday outing

Ned Stafford

Hamburg



[Image: Credit: Paweł Łoj]

On Thursday 28 January 2016, Elżbieta Gürtler-Krawczyńska and her husband, Krzysztof Krawczyński, were in their silver Mercedes, driving through the evening darkness toward their home near Atlanta in the United States. It was her 79th birthday and they had earlier enjoyed a celebratory dinner in a restaurant.

Kris and Elizabeth, as they were called by their American friends, were both born in Poland. They had both qualified in medicine in 1962, from what is now called the Medical University of Warsaw. And in 1984, as political tensions grew in Poland—at the time a member of the former Soviet controlled communist eastern bloc—they both emigrated to the US for a new start in life. More than three successful decades later, as they drove home from Elizabeth's birthday dinner, both were looking forward to enjoying many more years together.

Elizabeth, professor emerita of radiology at Emory University, was active in Atlanta's Polish community and in the Catholic Church. Extremely proud of her Polish heritage, she had in the 1990s in Rome personally received Holy Communion from her

fellow countryman, Pope John Paul II. "I was really in heaven," she later recalled.

Kris was internationally renowned as an expert in viral hepatitis. During his 31 years at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), he investigated pathological, immunological, and virological aspects of hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and hepatitis E infections. His most important original contributions included the identification of hepatitis C virus antigen, which was then applied to liver biopsy specimens from patients with chronic hepatitis and hepatic localisation of hepatitis E virus antigen. He was the author of more than 130 scientific papers and wrote numerous chapters in various textbooks.

Unknown to Kris and Elizabeth as they were driving home from the birthday dinner, a police officer in his patrol car a few miles away had spotted a suspicious looking car. The officer tried to get the driver to stop at the side of the road. Instead, the driver fled at high speed with the police car in pursuit—siren wailing and blue warning lights flashing overhead.

Elżbieta Grażyna Gürtler-Krawczyńska was born on 28 January 1938 in Warsaw. Her mother was a doctor and her father a journalist who worked in a government ministry. When she was two years old, Elżbieta—along with her mother and grandmother—was among the 1.7 million Polish citizens forcibly deported by the former Soviet Union to labour camps in central Asia and Siberia. Elżbieta, her mother, and her grandmother were loaded into a cattle car with 60 others. The only toilet was a hole cut into the floor, and the only heat was provided by a tiny stove. Once a day, soldiers would open the cattle car door to give the prisoners black bread and either water or thin soup. In a 2005 interview in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* newspaper, Elżbieta said of her mother and grandmother, "I don't know how they kept me alive."

After a four week journey they were placed in a labour camp in Kazakhstan. When Soviet officials learned that Elżbieta's mother was a doctor, they put her to work in a military hospital. Elżbieta and her grandmother were allowed to return home to Warsaw in 1946. Her mother, however, had been accused of being an enemy of the Soviet state and was put in prison. She

was not able to return to Poland until 1954. Of the 1.7 million deportees, only around 500 000 were later accounted for. Most of the others are thought to have died.

In 2005 Elizabeth helped arrange for a documentary about the mass deportations—*A Forgotten Odyssey*¹ by film-maker Jagna Wright—to be shown in Atlanta. “I just need to tell people what happened, and to pray for all the lost life,” she said at the time.

After qualifying in medicine in 1962, Elżbieta trained in cardiology. She would become deputy head of the Department of General Cardiology at the Institute of Cardiology in Warsaw. In the early 1980s she served as treasurer and secretary of the Warsaw division of the Polish Society of Cardiology. After the move to Atlanta, she was awarded a research fellowship in nuclear medicine at Emory University and was later named assistant professor of radiology. Her work focused on clinical trials in nuclear imaging of the heart.

Krzysztof Zygmunt Krawczyński was born on 5 July 1938 in Warsaw. In his first year at university, he met Elżbieta and fell in love. They married in late 1961. After receiving his medical degree in 1962, Krzysztof worked at the Department of Immunopathology of the National Institute of Hygiene in Warsaw, where he received a doctorate and higher doctorate, specialising in pathomorphology. He completed his postdoctoral training in New York City at Cornell University Medical School’s research laboratories at New York Hospital, now part of New York-Presbyterian Hospital.

By 1970, even though he was working behind the so called iron curtain in eastern Europe, he had coauthored papers published in the *Lancet*.^{2 3} In 1983 he lectured at the Royal Free Hospital in London on the relevance of morphological aspects of experimental viral hepatitis to the natural history of the disease.⁴ After he joined the CDC in Atlanta, he collaborated with the National Institutes of Health, the US Food and Drug Administration, and research centres around the world. His investigations included numerous experimental studies on non-human primates, including an investigation into antiviral immunity against the hepatitis B virus infection.⁵ He also studied the potential for developing a hepatitis E vaccine.⁶ Kris did not officially retire from the CDC until May 2015. Even after retiring he followed the research literature in his specialism closely and held discussions with former colleagues.

The Krawczyński’s friends at the Chopin Society of Atlanta, where Elizabeth was a board member, described Kris as “a charming gentleman with a sharp but kind sense of humor.” He

“was always by his wife’s side, always supporting her initiatives with patience and a smile.”

Dorota Lato, president of the Chopin Society, told *The BMJ* that she saw a photo of Kris and Elizabeth when they were 18 years old and it was clear “they were already in love.” Lato adds that more than 60 years later, it was clear that their love and devotion to each other was still strong.

“They had many trips planned,” says their daughter, Anna Paré, who practises dermatology in the Atlanta area and in October 2015 had spent time with her father in Paris, one of his favourite destinations. “They had travelled the world, but hoped to see more.”

But a few minutes before Kris and Elizabeth would have safely arrived home the unthinkable happened: what their friends would later describe as “a senseless car crash.” Their car entered an intersection and was crushed by the vehicle that was fleeing police.⁷

Elizabeth and Kris were mourned by hundreds at a funeral mass in Atlanta followed by a celebration of their lives. Two weeks later in Warsaw, a mass was attended by lifelong friends and colleagues, and they were laid to rest at Powazki cemetery. They leave their daughter and two granddaughters.

Biography

Krzysztof Krawczyński (b 1938, q Warsaw 1962) and his wife of 55 years, Elżbieta Gürtler-Krawczyński (b 1938, q Warsaw, 1962), both died on 28 January 2016 from injuries caused by a car accident.

- 1 Wright J. *A Forgotten Odyssey: Poles deported to Siberia in 1940*. 2000. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJFDAXWRg5yYfa4yOa9EeFIHSGmzWOU4C>
- 2 Brzosko WJ, Madalinski K, Krawczyński K, Nowoslawski A. Antigenic determinants on Australia-antigen particles. *Lancet* 1970;295:1058. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(70)91188-8 pmid:4191661.
- 3 Nowoslawski A, Brzosko WJ, Madaliński K, Krawczyński K. Cellular localisation of Australia antigen in the liver of patients with lymphoproliferative disorders. *Lancet* 1970;295:494-8. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(70)91580-1 pmid:4190180.
- 4 News and notes. *BMJ* 1983;287:765doi:10.1136/bmj.287.6394.765.
- 5 Kamili S, Sozzi V, Thompson G, et al. Efficacy of hepatitis B vaccine against antiviral drug-resistant hepatitis B virus mutants in the chimpanzee model. *Hepatology* 2009;49:1483-91. doi:10.1002/hep.22796 pmid:19274751.
- 6 Krawczyński K. Hepatitis E vaccine—ready for prime time? *N Engl J Med* 2007;356:949-51. doi:10.1056/NEJMe068311 pmid:17329703.
- 7 Father, son charged in wreck that killed retired CDC researchers. www.ajc.com/news/news/crime-law/2-killed-in-gwinnett-county-crash-involving-2-fleeing-qfWWM/.

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