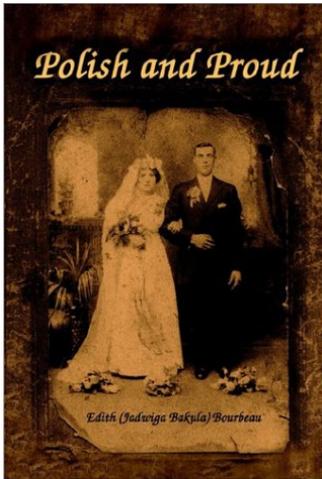

***Polish and Proud* by Edith (Jadwiga Bakula) Bourbeau, 1st Books Library, 2002, 360 pages.**



The author wrote her memoirs for her son and readers will be glad that she did. Jadwiga (Edith) Bakula was born in 1938, in Turners Falls, Massachusetts. A guide describes Turners Falls as a “late 19th century, New England industrial village.” Her parents emigrated from Poland before World War I and met in Massachusetts. They worked hard all their lives--on farms and in local industries. Her father, Frank, did shift work and often had two jobs. They raised eight children--Edith was the youngest.

The book is more than the author's autobiography. Ms. Bourbeau's aim was to tell us about the tiny settlement she refers to as “The Patch” in Turners Falls. It consists of eight streets and four stores and was settled by Polish immigrants. This was home to the Bakula family and the author still lives there today. She set out to gather stories from older residents, friends and family, asking each one for a favorite memory. She also set down her own recollections. The lives of the Bakulas are interwoven with stories and anecdotes about friends, acquaintances, local characters, major and minor events. There are 189 “chapters.” Not everything is equally interesting but Ms.

Bourbeau is a fine storyteller and knows how to draw the reader into her patchwork of stories. We read about weddings, births, deaths, accidents, flood of 1936, picnics, potato bakes, ice skating, dancing, homework, senior year, war. Edith writes proudly that many young people from “The Patch” served in World War II, including four of her siblings--brother Walter was wounded in action and awarded the Purple Heart.

Ms. Bourbeau's parents, Frank and Leonora—“Ma” and “Ta”--are in her words the “kingpins” of her book. They are vividly portrayed. During the Depression years they would not touch any food at dinner until the children had their fill. “Ta” was compassionate, fun loving, could dance around the room with a broom. He taught Edith to dance, took her to the movies. “Ma” was strict, resourceful, hard working. She made sure the family was taken care of. However, Edith's recollections include their shortcomings. “Ta” had a fierce temper and “Ma” could be possessive at times. Ms. Bourbeau's candor in writing about family, friends, and herself gives her reminiscences veracity and authenticity.

The stories extend back to 1915, when Edith's parents were married. The author does not appear till later in the book--she is the youngest in her family. Like her siblings before her, Edith worked at various jobs after school and in the summer. During several vacations she worked in tobacco fields. She describes in detail the process of tying and twisting tobacco plants--a back-breaking job that paid well. She was fortified by her mother's egg salad sandwiches and the fact that she went dancing once a week--no matter how tired she was. It is clear that life in “The Patch” was hard but Edith always had the support of her older siblings and friends. There were many good times. Edith describes family holiday celebrations, especially Christmas Eve. Polish traditions were always joyfully observed.

Edith dreamed of becoming a professional hairdresser. Her parents paid for her courses in Boston and she graduated from the Wilfred Academy of Hair and Beauty Culture. She enjoyed her work. Now she is retired.

Ms. Bourbeau tells us about her personal life--a difficult first marriage that ended in divorce, her relationship with her son Chris and her successful second marriage to Charles Bourbeau.

She devotes several chapters to her trip to Poland in 1979. It is in Poland that she first heard the term “Polonia” applied to herself.

Ms. Bourbeau has many interests and also teaches classes in conversational Polish at a local library. She ends her book with these words: “I'm proud to be a woman born of Polish immigrant parents, and brought up in the Patch.”

The book would have benefited greatly from professional proofreading.

Monika Mieroszewska