July 23, 2005
New York Times

Tending the Memories of an Enduring Polish Family

By **RICHARDBERNSTEIN**

KRAKOW, Poland

THE photograph is one of those sepia-toned images full of suggestions about the unrecoverable past: two women, one young, one older, seated on wicker chairs in a somewhat tangled garden, while lying at their feet is a young girl, maybe 9 or10, her hand resting in what look like buttercups.

But superimposed on the pastoral image, which is of three generations of the Olczak family of Warsaw and Krakow, there are two strands of barbed wire, suggesting to the viewer the horrors that the women in the photograph are about to know.

The photograph is part of the cover design of "In the Garden of Memory: A Memoir," by Joanna Olczak-Ronikier, who is the young girl in the picture.

Ms. Olczak-Ronikier has become well known in Poland, since her book won the country's most prestigious literary award, the Nike Prize, in 2002. The book sold a very impressive 80,000 copies in Poland and has also been published in Britain, France and the Netherlands, and other foreign editions are in the works.

Ms. Olczak-Ronikier's memoir gained its broad audience in Poland partly because the clan described init is one of Poland's most illustrious, but also because its members were deeply involved in the central events of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Her family left its traces especially in the two interrelated areas of culture and politics, though not only in those. One relative, André Citroën, founded the Citroën automobile company in France; Ms. Olczak-Ronikier's grandfather, whom she calls the hero of her memoir, was oneof Poland's most famous booksellers and publishers, and a man who nurtured a generation of Polish writers.

Another member of the almost Tolstoyian dramatis personae was Zygmunt Bychowski, who served as a doctor in the Russian Army during the Russo-Japanese war of 1904. A great-uncle, Maksymilian Horwitz, was a revolutionary, a leader of the Communist International who knew Lenin and Trotsky and was a radical supporter of the proletarian dictatorship and its cruel methods. There is a haunting photograph in Ms. Olczak-Ronikier's book that shows him after he had been arrested

and tortured, and shortly before he was executed, by Stalin's police in Moscow in1937.

In a more recent generation, Ms. Olczak-Ronikier's relatives include Marek Beylin, a commentator for Gazeta Wyborcza, Poland's most influential newspaper, and Peter Osnos, whose family moved to America and who is now a publisher in New York.

Ms.Olczak-Ronikier lives with her husband, Michael Ronikier, a translator of books and plays from English to Polish, in an apartment in the Salvator district of Krakow, whose stately brick houses have beautiful views of the Vistula River.

Everything is old or, if not old, comfortably worn - the rooms, the books, the furniture. Ms. Olczak-Ronikier is a small woman with darkhair and bright eyes whose life before tackling her family history centered on the Polish theater.

Among her other books is a handsome, lavishly illustrated coffee-table tome on cabaret in Krakow. She is now writing a script based on "In the Garden of Memory," which will be broadcast on Polish television.

SHE said she wrote her memoir because she knew there were good stories in her family history and, as she put it, "good stories should be told." But there were also deeper reasons.

"There's a saying in my family: 'You should achieve something in your life,' " she said. She suffered because of it, feeling inadequate in front of the portraits of the relatives who, in her view, had accomplished so much. Writing her book was an act of redemption, she said, away of shedding a burden. "I compare it to a sack full of heavy stones that I was able to throw away," she said.

Needless to say, she is part of the story. The girl in the dust-jacket photograph survived the Holocaust, along with the other women pictured there, her mother and her grandmother, and they are central to the tale.

Ms.Olczak-Ronikier's grandmother, Janina Mortkowicz, was the wife of Ms.Olczak-Ronikier's hero, her grandfather Jakub Mortkowicz, who opened what became one of Warsaw's most important bookstores and publishing houses at the end of World War I.

"He was an example of the tragic love of assimilated Jews in Poland," Ms. Olczak-Ronikier said. "He often met with anti-Semitic attacks, but the purpose of his life was to promote Polish literature."

The account of Jakub Mortkowicz in Ms. Olczak-Ronikier's book is a complex and vivid one. Early in the 20th century he went to prison because a charity he supported gave proscribed books to the poor. He seems to have been embarrassed by

his own bookseller father, who spoke Polish with a Yiddish accent and seemed to his son too tainted by a kind of parochial religiosity.

In 1931, facing bankruptcy - because, Ms. Olczak-Ronikier said, he provided too many stipends to his authors - Mr.Mortkowicz committed suicide, a terrible gesture that had a redemptive feature for the rest of his family. When the Nazis came to Poland a decade after his suicide, his wife, daughter and granddaughter were saved by Polish friends, among them the widow and daughter of one of the writers, Stefan Zeromski, whom Mr. Mortkowicz had supported.

"We survived thanks to the Poles," she said. "My family was well known because we were a famous family and famous for Polish culture, and that's why we were helped." After the war, with Warsaw in ruins, the family moved to Krakow, where Ms. Olczak-Ronikier's mother and grandmother tried to revive the publishing house, but in 1950, when the new Communist government began nationalizing private businesses, they gave it up, forever.

Ms. Olczak-Ronikier lived for a time in Warsaw during a first marriage, and then, in 1968, she divorced and moved to back to Krakow. There, especially after the fall of Communism, she watched as a large family, now scattered mostly in Russia, Poland and the United States, began to re-establish contact.

HER book ends with a scene of poignant triumph, with a family gathering in Tuscany in 2001. The family spoke of having survived the "two diabolical forces" of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism that "had sworn to annihilate us." They spoke, too, of what it meant to have survived the onslaught.

"People who have been uprooted and stripped of the memory, attachments and values passed down by preceding generations do not know what they are living for," Petya Horwitz, a Moscow chemist who is the son of the slain Communist true-believer Maksymilian Horwitz, said at the gathering, "and they have nothing to pass on to their own children."

It is a summing up of a long, turbulent history that could well stand as a statement of purpose for Ms. Olczak-Ronikier, her life and her work.

Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company