

**Strange sanctuary; The Zookeeper's Wife A War Story Diane Ackerman W.W. Norton:
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Author: Donna Seaman

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CORRECTION: SEE CORRECTION APPENDED; 'The Zookeeper's Wife': A photo caption Sunday with the book review of "The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story" by Diane Ackerman referred to Antonina and Jan Zabinski, a couple who offered refuge to Jews during World War II, as "German saviors." The Zabinskis were Poles.; 'The Zookeeper's Wife': A photo caption Sept. 2 with the book review of "The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story" by Diane Ackerman referred to Antonina and Jan Zabinski, a couple who offered refuge to Jews during World War II, as "German saviors." The Zabinskis were Poles.; 'Zookeeper's Wife': A photo caption Sunday with the review of "The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story" by Diane Ackerman referred to Antonina and Jan Zabinski, a couple who offered refuge to Jews during World War II, as "German saviors." The Zabinskis were Poles.

History is a loosely knotted net, through which many lives and stories are lost. Jan Zabinski, the director of the Warsaw Zoo, and his wife, Antonina, saved the lives of more than 300 imperiled Jews, but the zookeeper and his wife fell through gaps in the chronicles of Nazi-besieged Poland. They are now reclaimed by poet and naturalist Diane Ackerman in "The Zookeeper's Wife," a stunning tale of war and sanctuary.

Ackerman writes perceptive, knowledgeable and rhapsodic books about the miraculous workings of nature, from the ways of whales to the glory of roses and the "alchemy of mind" that makes us human. She not only shares the Zabinskis' fascination with and respect for animals, she and Antonina are soul sisters in the pleasure they take in the sensuous beauty and ceaseless inventiveness of life. They also share a passion for writing. Antonina left a vivid record of her extraordinary experiences in her journals and the books she wrote for children.

Jan was an ambitious zoologist with a "grand vision" for Warsaw's 5-year-old zoo when he and Antonina (who was 11 years his junior) married in 1931. She possessed a preternaturally empathic sense of animal life. Able to "slip out of her human skin" and enter the minds of other creatures, Antonina could perceive the world from the animals' points of view and understand their fears. Not only could she soothe agitated or depressed animals of all shapes and sizes, she also discerned a mutual yearning for communication and companionship between humans and other species. As the curtain rises on this riveting slice of recovered history, Antonina, the imaginary love child of Doctor Dolittle and Jane Goodall, is looking after two baby lynxes, a wolf cub, a "sociable badger," a red deer fawn and her toddler son. Life is blissfully demanding in the lushly wooded and flowery zoo, which in 1939 is simply "magnificent." And doomed.

German bombers fill the sky above Warsaw on the first day of school in that fateful September, and in a matter of hours, everything changes. Located on the Vistula River, the zoo comes under heavy bombardment. As the terrified animals burst from their blasted cages, jumpy Polish soldiers shoot down those they deem injured or dangerous. Yet, miraculously enough, an array of animals escapes unharmed and crosses the bridge into the city, creating a "biblical hallucination."

Poland is forced to surrender; the nightmare occupation begins, and Jan, whose sangfroid and "penchant for risk" are matched by extraordinary good luck, joins the many-pronged, superlatively organized Polish Resistance. The Zabinskis remain at the damaged zoo and manage to secure some of their most precious animals. But how long will they be allowed to stay? Enter Lutz Heck, director of the Berlin Zoo and a big-game hunter. Heck admires the Zabinskis and is a bit sweet on willowy Antonina, a perfect embodiment of Aryan femininity. A fervent Nazi, Heck intends to bring racial purity to nature itself by resurrecting three legendary extinct German species: the aurochs, a mythologized bull; the Neolithic horse, or tarpan; and the forest bison, which just happens to be a specialty of Jan's.

With Heck's protection, the Zabinskis stay put. But they pay the devil's price. Although Heck extols the nobility of animals (how incisively and damningly Ackerman dissects the Nazis' perverted view of nature), his treatment of the Zabinskis' beloved "animal republic" is depraved and grotesque. Shocked and appalled by the bloodbath, Antonina wonders, "How many humans will die like this in the coming months?" No sane and decent man or woman could ever have imagined.

Jan (whose Polish Underground code name was Francis, for Francis of Assisi, patron saint of animals) grew up in Jewish neighborhoods and attended Jewish schools, and consequently he feels "a moral indebtedness to the Jews." A maestro of subterfuge, he lays his life on the line day after day to help the Jews imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto. Back at the zoo, Antonina makes the "guests" as comfortable as possible. While most of the more than 300 Jews the Zabinskis shelter stay only until safe passage can be arranged, others live at the zoo for years, hiding in plain sight. Ackerman observes, "who better than zookeepers to devise fitting camouflage?" Bursting with people and animals, the Zabinskis' villa "pulsed like a beehive." Ackerman also describes the villa as an ark, and she likens the constant need for defensive strategy and "all the planes of existence and resistance" in the villa to a "three-dimensional chess game."

Cool-headed, with nerves of steel, Jan undertakes missions as suspenseful as the plot of any top-notch thriller. Antonina, exhibiting equal grace under pressure, and even more vulnerable after the birth of their daughter, survives more than her share of terrifying encounters with Nazis. Her battles of wits eerily echo scenes in "Suite Franaise," a recently discovered, superlative novel of Nazi France by Irne Nmirovsky, a valiant Russian-Jewish refugee who died at Auschwitz.

What makes this particular chapter in the electrifying history of resistance against the Nazis uniquely resonant? The Zabinskis' determination to make their underground realm convivial. To be sure, they were ever vigilant. But, Ackerman writes, "keeping the body alive at the expense of spirit wasn't Antonina's way. Jan believed in tactics and subterfuge, and Antonina in living as joyously as possible." The Zabinskis also "needed to remain among animals for life to feel true." Their animal companions -- an eccentric rabbit, gluttonous hamster, high-strung birds and a playful muskrat, to name a few -- provide comic relief and unconditional affection as Antonina labors in the garden and kitchen to nurture her large, endangered patchwork family.

Ackerman matches her animated accounts of life at the zoo with tense forays into the ghetto and discerning profiles of exceptional individuals. The renowned entomologist Dr. Szymon Tenenbaum, for example, whose glorious collection of a half-million insect species, thanks to Jan's ingenuity, helps save many of Tenenbaum's fellow Jews. The Hasidic rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira tends to his neighbors' bodies and souls by setting up soup kitchens and encouraging Jews to meditate on the "beauty of nature." And famed pediatrician Henryk Goldszmit (whose pen name was Janusz Korczak) refuses safe passage out of the ghetto to stay with children under his care, ultimately accompanying them to Treblinka.

It is no stretch to say that this is the book Ackerman was meant to write. Ever since "A Natural History of the Senses," she has been building a galaxy of incandescent works that celebrate the unity and wonder of the living world. But every rapturous hour she has spent communing with plants and animals, every insight gleaned into human nature, every moment under the spell of language is a steppingstone that led her to Poland, the home of her maternal grandparents, and to the incomparable heroes Jan and Antonina Zabinski. The result of her tenacious research, keen interpretation and her own "transmigration of sensibility" is a shining book beyond category. Ripe for cinematic interpretation, "The Zookeeper's Wife" is a book to read and reread and give to others.

Compassion and reverence for life persisted during the shadow time of the Nazis, and sustain those struggling today to survive war and genocide in besieged cities, refugee camps and secret havens. What hidden stories of courage and succor are yet to be told? Will we ever be able to answer Antonina's question: Why is it that "animals can sometimes subdue their predatory ways in only a few months, while humans, despite centuries of refinement, can quickly grow more savage than any beast?" *

Credit: Donna Seaman is an editor for Booklist and host of the radio program "Open Books" in Chicago (www.openbooksradio.org). Her author interviews are collected in "Writers on the Air."

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