

The Zookeeper's Wife: Life and heroism in wartime Warsaw

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Directed by Niki Caro; screenplay by Angela Workman, based on the non-fiction book by Diane Ackerman

New Zealand-born filmmaker Niki Caro's *The Zookeeper's Wife* recounts the true story of the rescue of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto during the Nazi invasion and occupation of Poland that began in 1939.

Adapted from the non-fiction book of the same title by Diane Ackerman, Caro's movie dramatizes the heroic efforts by Antonina and her husband, Dr. Jan Żabiński, to turn their bombed out Warsaw zoo into a safe haven and route to freedom for some 300 Jewish men, women and children. Ackerman's work relied on various sources, particularly Antonina's memoirs and letters, along with diaries, memoirs, articles and other writings by Ghetto inhabitants.

It is an intriguing and little known episode of the Holocaust. Metaphorically, this "zoo" story underscores the vile character of the Nazis' racist-chauvinist view that other peoples, especially the Jews, were subhuman species.

The Żabińskis put themselves and their children at grave risk at a time when even offering a Jewish person a cup of water in Warsaw was punishable by death.

Spanning seven years, starting in 1939, the movie opens with sequences revealing the intensely compassionate relationship that Antonina (Jessica Chastain) has with the zoo animals. On the eve of the German army's assault, she awakens her young son Ryszard (played first by Timothy Radford, and later by Val Maloku), who is peacefully sleeping alongside two lion cubs. Antonia makes her morning rounds, cycling through the zoo, followed by a galloping baby camel. It is feeding time when she greets her husband Jan (Johan Heldenbergh) and other staff members. The relationship between the Żabińskis and their exotic beasts seems idyllic.

But soon German bombs rain down on Warsaw, and whistling fire-balls destroy much of the city and devastate the zoo. Buildings and cages collapse, killing a good many of the animals. (Ackerman writes: "Miraculously, some animals survived at the zoo and many escaped across the bridge, entering Old Town while the capital burned. People brave enough to stand by their windows, or unlucky enough to be outside, watched a biblical hallucination unfolding as the zoo emptied into Warsaw's streets. Seals waddled along the banks

of the Vistula, camels and llamas wandered down alleyways, hooves skidding on cobblestone, ostriches and antelope trotted beside foxes and wolves, anteaters called out hatchee, hatchee as they scuttled over bricks.")

German forces enter the zoo and shoot many of the remaining animals and confiscate others. After an unsuccessful attempt to flee Warsaw, the Żabińskis are forced to make a proposal to an acquaintance and fellow zoologist, Lutz Heck (Daniel Brühl), head of Berlin's zoo and now a committed Nazi. Antonina and Jan request permission from Heck to transform the shattered facility into a pig farm. They suggest that the garbage from the Jewish Ghetto be used to feed the swine that, in turn, will feed the German army.

Heck is thrilled with the prospect of using the zoo's facility in his attempt to genetically resurrect the long-extinct bull, the aurochs, and promote it as a symbol of Aryan strength and purity. Under Heck's nose, however, Jan begins smuggling out Ghetto residents hidden in large containers of garbage. The refugees are then concealed in the cages and tunnels of the zoo.

"I was raised with these people," Jan tells Antonina. "Jews, Gentiles, it never mattered to me." For Antonina, her "human zoo" will help mend the wounds of those like Urszule (Shira Haas), a traumatized teenage girl brutally raped by two German soldiers. The cunning and dangerous operation also involves fabricating identity papers. Of all the hundreds of Jews brought out by the Żabińskis, only two were murdered.

When the liquidation of the Ghetto begins in April 1943 and thousands of people are herded into trains bound for concentration camps, Jan joins the uprising (Ackerman: "Sixty-three days of ferocious street-to-street fighting") and stockpiles weapons in the zoo. During the fighting, he is shot and wounded, and sent to a German internment camp. Antonina, who has given birth to their daughter, is kept in the dark about his fate, forcing her to once again tangle with the pernicious Heck.

A commercial production like *The Zookeeper's Wife*—and, in fact, perhaps any artistic rendering—almost inevitably involves a smoothing and rounding off of complex history. But despite weaknesses on this score, the film makes a genuine effort to show that the Żabińskis' compassion is extended to all living creatures. They are non-Jews (Jan was raised as an atheist), a

cultured pair who felt compelled to make a supreme sacrifice to oppose the Nazi onslaught.

Caro (*Whale Rider, North Country, McFarland, USA*) has chosen a legitimate subject to recreate, treating it with a degree of skill and imagination. The scenes of the zoo's demolishing are wrenching. As Ackerman puts it, the menagerie was "guillotined by the war." While the movie is not the be-all-and-end-all in terms of psychological depth, it takes a stand for solidarity and unity.

This has elicited a negative reaction from a number of critics, who see the film as insufficiently dark, i.e., *The Zookeeper's Wife* does not argue that human beings are essentially rotten and selfish.

There is much to be said for the performances. The English-language film requires the actors to speak with a Polish accent, not an easy task for Chastain. But regardless of the flaws in her delivery, she embodies sincere human emotion, an appropriate counterweight to the fascist inhumanity.

In an interview, Caro describes the remarkable scene in which Chastain's Antonina saves a newborn elephant from suffocation: "We shot overnight for two nights in the freezing cold. Jessica was barefoot, on her knees, in a tiny cocktail dress, on concrete, underneath the feet of an elephant. And the rest of us were wearing four pairs of pants, millions of ski jackets. And Lily's [the elephant who had just given birth] trunk was all over Jessica, searching for apples that Jessica had concealed under her skirt. All of the animal work was all completely natural. I never wanted an animal to have to do a particular trick or action."

One of the most haunting sequences occurs when the Nazis are packing the Ghetto inmates into cattle cars. As scores of children are lifted onto the train, German soldiers are throwing suitcases into a big pile—the cold, impersonal discarding of possessions and identities of those headed for the gas chambers. Other notable moments include the evocative image of ashes falling like snow from the Ghetto's incineration and the children's colored drawings on the walls of the Żabińskis' dank basement sanctuary.

Lacking in *The Zookeeper's Wife*, as in almost every other recent film on the subject of the Holocaust and World War II, is a significant historical framework and context. How did fascism arise and conquer? What political forces were responsible?

In her book, Ackerman observes that the "Nazi goal of more 'living space' (*Lebensraum*) applied pointedly to Poland, where Hitler had ordered his troops to 'kill without pity or mercy all men, women, and children of Polish descent or language. Only in this way can we obtain the Lebensraum we need.'" But this does not help explain how Hitler came to power in the first place.

Abram Leon (1918-1944), a Jewish Trotskyist born in Warsaw who fought against the Nazi occupation of Belgium, wrote, "The decline of capitalism has suspended the Jews

between heaven and earth." In the face of the ruinous crisis of German imperialism following World War I, the betrayals of the working class by social democracy and Stalinism opened the door to the fascist barbarism.

Caro told an interviewer: "We started out making a historical drama and world events have shown us that we've made a profoundly contemporary film. I hope people go and see it and revisit what happened in the 1930s and 1940s, and recognize that there are horrifying parallels to what is happening right now." It seems fair to assume that she is referring to developments like the Donald Trump presidency and the general rise of right-wing, nationalist parties.

The Żabińskis' daughter, Teresa, explained to *People* magazine, "My parents told me that they did only what should have been done—it was their obligation to do that. They were just decent people. They said decent people should do the same, nothing else. I'd like as many people as possible to understand what actually happened here in Warsaw during the war, and how much humanity and love can do."

Also cited in *People* article was Stephanía Kenigswain Stibon, three years old when she, her mother and brother escaped from the Warsaw Ghetto and were saved by the Żabińskis in 1943: "I remember that we ran around the house when we could, because usually we were in the basement or in the cages. But what I remember most is that the Germans used to come from time to time, and when the people at the gate saw them coming, they gave a signal to the villa and Antonina used to sit by the piano and start to play and my brother and I knew we had to hide. My brother would always say, 'Come, come, we have to hide so they don't kill mom.'"

Stibon's family hid in the zoo for over two months—the longest period anyone stayed there.



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