

The Zookeeper's wife monologues

NARRATOR: This is a very special and true story from 70 years ago. The Zookeeper's Wife tells the account of keepers of the Warsaw ZOO, Antonina and Jan Żabinski, who helped save hundreds of people and animals during the German invasion.

He was the director of the Warsaw ZOO; she was his wife and the caretaker of the ZOO animals. During World War II and the Nazi Occupation of Warsaw, they managed to save hundreds of Jews by using the empty ZOO cages to hide them, and thus facilitate their transfer from the Ghetto. She was a tall and beautiful blonde, who loved the zoo animals and ... why not let her tell her story: */points to Antonina/*

ANTONINA ŻABIŃSKA: Once a foreigner fell in love with me, and in exchange for my hand in marriage, offered me sheep and camels. But no one, even the handsome and influential Lutz Heck, Hitler's brilliant zoologist, */points to Lutz/* could sway me from love and loyalty to my loving partner */points to Jan/*. Jan bravely supported me when the opportunity to save Jewish lives presented itself. There was nothing that could deter us from doing so, either danger, persecution, nor the threat of execution. We were so happy and then – in 1939 – the terrible destruction began. I had to do something... I had to save as many as possible. This was our God given duty, our sacred obligation to humanity. I even needed to pretend an interest in Lutz's attentions in order to save, at first the animals, then the Jews, and even my son, */points to Ryś/*.

NARRATOR: Many children's lives were disrupted by war, Ryś, named after a mountain lion, Antonina and Jan's son, despite the turmoil in his young life, was lucky to survive and to keep his parents, while so many Polish children were killed, died from starvation, and disease or became orphans during the war, and the German occupation. But let him tell you himself... */points to /*

SYN – RYŚ ŻABIŃSKI: My Mamusia is remarkable */points to*

Antonina/. She taught me to love the animals that became a part of our household. But even better, she taught me to value human life above all. Because of her, even as a child, I became a co- conspirator in one of the greatest rescue missions of the Holocaust. My life was turned upside down because of the war and the occupation. I learned survival at a very early age. I stared death in the face, once I was almost shot by Lutz – “Hitlerowska Świnia”. Sometimes I think, animals are kinder than people. My father */points to Jan/* would agree.

NARRATOR: Jan was a prominent zoologist, the founder, and director of the Warsaw ZOO. When World War II broke out, because the Zoo was located near anti- artillery positions, the bombings killed many animals. Some escaped, some were transferred by Lutz to the Hanover and Vienna Zoo. This nearly destroyed Jan...but let him tell his story:

JAN ŻABIŃSKI: My wife */points to Antonina/* is the bravest woman that I know. She not only helped me to create and administer one of the best ZOOS in Europe, she was the driving force in saving many of our friends, Poles, and especially Jews, from persecution and death during the Nazi occupation of Warsaw. Her love and loyalty never wavered, and it helped me survive fighting for the Resistance, the wounds that I sustained, and the imprisonment in a war camp. When I finally returned to my family, we rebuild the ZOO together and I stayed on as the director until 1951. One of my most difficult moments was the New Year’s Eve 1940 massacre, co called “a HUNT” - of the ZOO animals by the Nazi officers. We had to keep calm in order to continue our rescue work. Lutz, */points to Lutz/* who at first seemed to be our ally, proved himself to be a true Nazi, pretending to help save the animals, but looking out for himself and trying to steal my wife’s affections.

NARRATOR: Lutz Heck, was Hitler’s chief Zoologist. He claimed his mission was to protect the animals, but in reality, he was looking out for his own career and secretly lusted after Antonina. Perhaps we can listen to his version...*/points to Lutz/*

LUTZ HECK: I am the great Lutz Heck – Hitler’s favorite. I am not one to brag, but...I know everything there is to know about animals and ZOOS. I have traveled widely throughout the world, discovering some new species while recognizing the imminent extinction of others. I am so much more informed and traveled than the Polish zoologist – they are lucky to have me as their friend. */points to Jan/* I am so brilliant that nothing escapes me. Now, Antonina intrigues me... she has such ... skills with the animals. Ah... */sighs/*. I feel that I can trust her... although sometimes she acts very strangely... Could she be hiding something from me? How is it possible to fool the great Lutz Heck???

NARRATOR: Many Poles and Jews were in hiding at the ZOO in animal cages, like the pheasant exhibit, or were concealed in the cellars. Magdalena Gross is one of the survivors. This is her story...

MAGDALENA GROSS: I was a prominent sculptor of Warsaw, until I was forced into the Jewish Ghetto. I was rescued and transferred from the Ghetto by Jan and Antonina, as was a famous journalist Rachela Auberbach, a notable microbiologist of the Science Academy, Ludwik Hirsfeld, and many, many others. While collecting leftover food scraps from the Ghetto for the pig farm that the German’s allowed to be housed at the ZOO in the empty cages, Jan was able to smuggle us, and many families out of the Ghetto. Antonina cared for our safety and all needs, while her husband organized new identities, passports and transit letters to get us out of Warsaw. Some of our rescues were dramatic, some outright impossible, we were all so grateful for their sacrifice. Antonina invented an elaborate warning system. She played the piano to alert us of imminent discovery... once a child’s sneeze almost gave us away. In the evenings, she played to signal that the coast was clear. That’s when we were able to come out of hiding and enjoy a semblance of family life. Our lives were changed forever but were spared because of the zookeeper’s wife.

NARRATOR: Vad Yashem Institute recognized Antonina and Jan Żabinski’s great humanitarian effort – they were enshrined with the title

of “Righteous Among The Nations”. President Lech Kaczyński honored the couple with a post mortem order of the Rebirth of Poland, “Krzyż Komandorski Odrodzenia Polski”, and they are buried in the famous cemetery of heroes “Powązki” in Warsaw. An American writer, Diane Ackerman, wrote the novel, “Zookeeper’s Wife”, based mostly on Antonina’s own journals. This past year this work became a film starring an Oscar winner, Jessica Chastain. We encourage you to read the book, or, at least, see the movie. It is such a privilege to see a portrayal of a noble Polish woman, Antonina Żabiński, the Zookeeper’s Wife.

