

# The Zookeeper's Wife Explores a Different Kind of Heroism

by Kirk DICKEY



*The Russian soldiers barged into Antonina Zabinska's house, darting about "like hyenas" and grabbing anything they could steal. In the closing days of Germany's World War II occupation of Warsaw, Poland, even the enemies of her enemies were not friends.*

*One wrong move, or possibly no move at all, might set the soldiers off. The group's leader smiled at Antonina unsettlingly and grabbed a small golden medallion she always wore around her neck.*

Photo: Bill Green

She didn't look away. Instead, she pointed at her youngest child lying in a wicker cradle nearby and, dusting off some Russian she'd learned in her youth, Antonina told the man "Not allowed! Your mother! Your wife! Your sister! Do you understand?"

The man's face softened and some of the manic fury that had possessed him drained from his eyes. He ordered his men to put down the things they'd stolen and leave the house at once. Antonina said the men seemed to "shrink in size as they left one at a time like muzzled dogs."

She would later write that "I felt words like mother, wife, sister, have the power to change a bastard's spirit and conquer his murderous instincts, maybe there's some hope for the future of humanity after all."

As the tense scene plays out in the pages of Diane Ackerman's *The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story*—this year's Collin College "Book in Common" selection—the reader is reminded again that courage isn't solely a trait of the men who go off to fight in war. It is also a facet of the people who quietly resist and those who care for others—both physically and emotionally—in times of conflict.

Antonina's tale, as well as that of her husband Jan and her son Rys, is the true story of a Polish family which secretly took in about 300 refugees over three years of Germany's occupation of Poland and the Nazi's attempted extermination of the Jewish people. The Zabinskis hid friends and strangers alike in their tiny villa and in the Warsaw Zoo's animal habitats, which had largely been destroyed in Germany's initial assault on the country.

Jan's reaction to the invasion was to join the Polish underground resistance, helping to derail trains and slow the Germans' initiatives. He smuggled many people out of the Jewish ghetto and was ultimately taken prisoner in the Warsaw Uprising.

Antonina, meanwhile, used her



intuition and insight into human nature to deflect the Nazis' suspicions, while providing as much of a home as possible for her "guests," even after Jan was captured. To that end, she would bring the refugees together with her family after nightfall. There would be music, dinner and conversation. She listened to them and was almost like a therapist at times.

"The humanity that (Antonina and Jan) brought to the people in their care was extraordinary," Ackerman said of the Zabinskis. "As a result, all but two (of the refugees) survived the entire war. This remains one of the most successful rescues during that time."

Throughout the book, the Zabinskis are confronted with the horrors of war, from the construction of the ghettos and the oppression of their countrymen to the theft or wholesale slaughter of their beloved zoo animals. Antonina's reaction to all

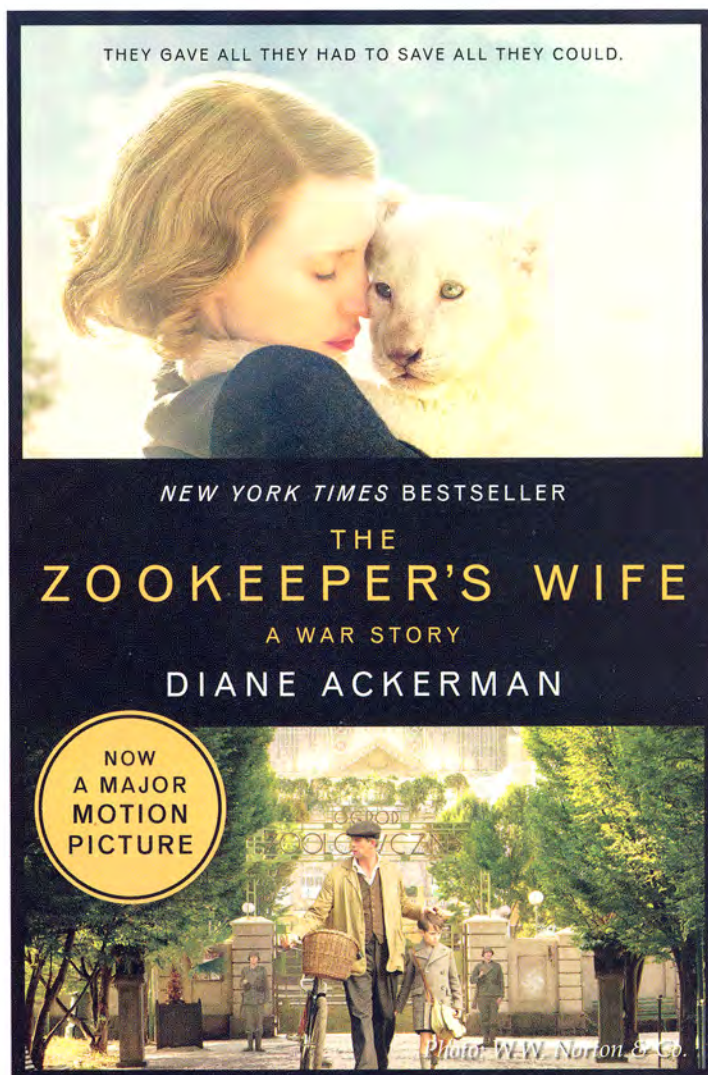
of this tragedy may be one of the reasons her spirit shines through so strongly throughout the book, which was shaped by Antonina's memoirs, interviews she and Jan did later in life and autobiographical children's books which she wrote about life at the zoo.

"Her attitude was so heroic, so soulful, so spiritual, so brave and so uncommon that I really couldn't let her disappear through the seams of history," Ackerman said. "She wasn't content to just have the people under her care just survive. She wanted them to survive the war with their humanity intact."

Ackerman believes that showcasing Antonina's struggle sheds light on a deeper truth about heroes in our world.

"There are extraordinary acts of mercy and heroism that people perform everyday on our war-torn planet," she said. "There are different forms of heroism. It is not always 'shoot-em-up' heroism. Sometimes it is about compassionate heroism. It's very important that those people are role models too."

Written primarily in a narrative nonfiction style, *The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story* was the winner of the



Orion Book Award and has been made into a movie of the same name. The movie is scheduled to premier at the end of March.

Ackerman will talk about her work and writing process in a series of "Book in Common" lectures at Collin College, April 5-7. The lecture series is the culmination of a yearlong program in which students throughout the college are encouraged to read the same book and discuss its themes. The lectures are free and open to the public. For more information about the lectures, including times and location, or to learn more about "Book in Common," visit <https://www.collin.edu/academics/bookincommon/>. ❖

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