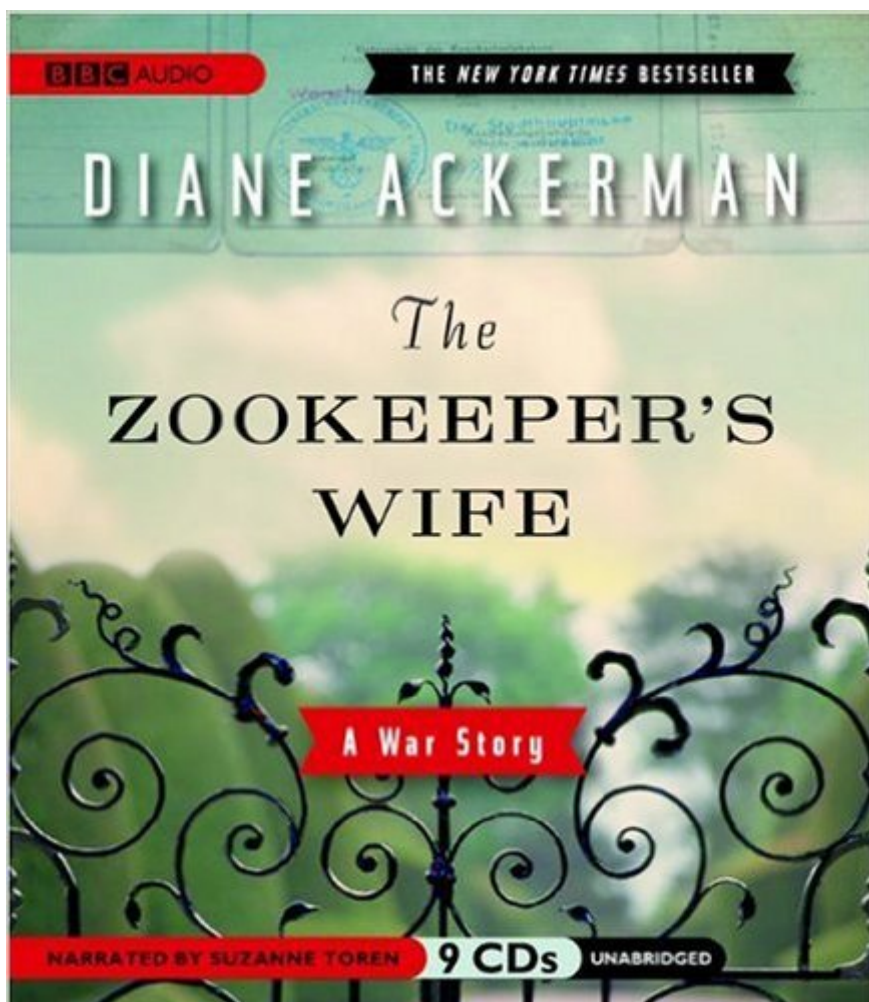


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The Zookeeper's Wife



Synopsis

When Germany invaded Poland, bombers devastated Warsaw and the city's zoo along with it. With most of their animals dead, zookeepers Jan and Antonina Zabinski began smuggling Jews into the empty cages. Another dozen guests hid inside the Zabinskis' villa, emerging after dark for dinner, socializing and, during rare moments of calm, piano concerts. Jan, active in the Polish resistance, kept ammunition buried in the elephant enclosure and stashed explosives in the animal hospital. Meanwhile, Antonina kept her unusual household afloat, caring for both its human and its animal inhabitants and refusing to give in to the penetrating fear of discovery, even as Europe crumbled around her.

Book Information

Audio CD: 1 pages

Publisher: BBC Audiobooks America; Unabridged edition (June 8, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1602834776

ISBN-13: 978-1602834774

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 1 x 6 inches

Shipping Weight: 4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (553 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

I feel bad knocking this book because the story of Jan and Antonina Zabinski is one of two amazing people in Warsaw during the German occupation who demonstrated courage, brilliance, resilience, and humanity in the face of the grossest barbarism this planet has seen. Yet, Diane Ackerman has placed me in this position with her absurdly overblown writing, her precious turns of phrase, and her inability to establish a coherent timeline or storyline for what she's relating. I made note of more outstanding examples of her jarring images: "In a darkness that deep, fireflies dance across eyes that see into themselves." "Once its sprightly melody had been a favorite of hers, but war plays havoc with sensory memories as the sheer intensity of each moment, the roiling adrenaline and fast pulse, drive memories in deeper, embed every small detail, and make events unforgettable." "Meanwhile, the brain piped fugues of worry and staged mind-theaters full of tragedies and

triumphs, because unfortunately, the fear of death does wonders to focus the mind, inspire creativity, and heighten the senses. Trusting one's hunches only seems a gamble if one has time for SEEM...." It seems Ms. Ackerman imagines herself to be the mistress of human senses and is writing beyond her material at hand. Too bad, because she had access to primary sources, to Antonina's extraordinary diary, which I wouldn't have minded reading without its being filtered through this author. Nonetheless, the awful times in Poland and Warsaw come crashing through Ackerman's writing anyway. One wonders how any people at all survived German barbarity.

There are many stories that continue to come out of the WW II experience, stories of courage, love and survival in the face of near hopeless situations inflicted upon the globe by Nazi Germany, and, thankfully, biographies of heroes whose moral convictions were stronger than the destructive forces of Hitler's cadre. THE ZOOKEEPER'S WIFE is yet another unknown story, a true tale of survival of the human spirit pitted against what seemed to be the end of the world in Poland. Yet this book is not 'just another war story'. As presented by the astute investigator and gifted writer Diane Ackerman, whose many books include 'A Natural History of the Senses', 'An Alchemy of Mind: The Marvel and Mystery of the Brain', 'The Moon by Whale Light - and Other Adventures Among Bats, Penguins', 'Crocodilians and Whales', 'A Natural History of Love', 'Deep Play', 'Cultivating Delight: A Natural History of My Garden', 'The Rarest of the Rare: Vanishing Animals, Timeless Worlds', and anthologies of poems such as 'I Praise My Destroyer: Poems' and 'Jaguar of Sweet Laughter: New and Selected Poems', this is a magical tale about a couple in Warsaw whose roles as zookeepers allowed their shared appreciation for animal life and ways of adapting to devise ingenious ways to protect many of the Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto from mass execution. Jan and Antonina Zabinski were Polish Christian keepers of the Zoo when the Germans under Hitler's scheme of world domination and purification of Europe for the chosen race of Aryans began. Ackerman quietly builds her setting by concentrating on the special gifts of these two remarkable people in caring for the animals of the zoo: her descriptions of the various members of the menagerie are at once comical and insightful.

This book recounts one of those odd, quirky episodes in history which illuminate a variety of circumstances and events in a whole new light. When Warsaw fell at the beginning of the Second World War, the city had one of the better-known zoos in Europe. The zookeeper, Jan Zabinski, his wife Antonina, and their son Rys, lived on the grounds in an official residence. Jan served briefly in the army during the fighting, and was captured. He almost immediately had a stroke of luck, though:

he met an old friend, a German zookeeper serving in the German army, and the friend escorted Zabinski back to his zoo. Over the next five years, until the zoo was liberated along with the rest of Warsaw towards the end of the year, the Zabinskis used their positions as zookeeper and wife, and local celebrities, to conceal several hundred Jews and other refugees from the Nazis, some of them hiding in the now disused animal cages on the grounds of the zoo (many of the animals were killed by soldiers, or starved to death). Jan Zabinski was involved in partisan activities, and concealed munitions and other supplies in places he didn't think anyone would look. At the start of the war, it turned out that the Nazis were interested in the zoo for two primary reasons: one, they wanted to "move to safekeeping" any rare animals it had--the safekeeping of course being in a German zoo; and two, they were obsessed with resurrecting extinct species of animal that they thought "wild" and "untamed" and "pure". Because of these obsessions, they let the zoo continue to operate at a lower level much longer than they otherwise would have, and the Zabinskis were able to rescue hundreds of lives as a result.

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