



DIANE ACKERMAN

The
**ZOOKEEPER'S
WIFE**

A War Story

EDITOR'S CHOICE BY DONALD ANDERSON

Matters of Life, Matters of Death

The Zookeeper's Wife

by Diane Ackerman

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WE HEAR OF MY LAI OR ABU GHRAIB and want to believe—don't we?—that our choices would have been different from those who will find their place in history as failures and moral dwarfs. Except: as the Milgram and the Stanford Prison experiments uncomfortably disclose—humans are only too willing to obey authority, even when that authority conflicts with their conscience. As we should by now know, it is in this way that ordinary folk, by merely “doing their jobs,” become agents in persecution, “cleansing,” and genocide. Now and again during the Milgram experiments, someone would refuse to “obey,” either to start or to continue to administer what they had every reason to believe was debilitating, if not fatal, electrical shock to unseen but screaming recipients. But such forswearing individuals were always in the minority. It's Paul Fussell who wrote, “If you can't imagine yourself an SS officer hustling the Jewish women and children to the gas chamber, you need to be more closely in touch with your buried self.” It was precisely the presence of this flaw in our species that makes the relief of Diane Ackerman's new book so achingly essential.

The Zookeeper's Wife is the real-life story of the Zabinskis—Jan and Antonia—who, in a bombed-out Warsaw, smuggled in and protected hundreds of Jews,

making human use of the emptied cages of the celebrated Warsaw Zoo. The zoo Jan directed was empty insofar as it, too, was randomly targeted by German bombs and its previous inmates killed, freed to starve in the city streets, or shipped elsewhere. Indeed, many of the animals were shipped by Nazi leadership in order to purify their breeding. One high Nazi zoo official was in particular interested in back-breeding projects that would reintroduce European forest bison and superior ancient horses. In effect, selective and retro-breeding of superior game for a superior human race to hunt—a mania that stretched to the uprooting of indigenous Slav plants to make room for Aryan seed: “Superior soldiers need to eat superior food”!

“Although Mengele’s subjects,” Ackerman writes, “could be operated on without any painkillers at all, a remarkable example of Nazi zoophilia is that a leading biologist was once punished for not giving worms enough anesthesia during an experiment.” Ackerman, as those who have read her books know, has an eye for such detail and *The Zookeeper’s Wife* is a trove of assiduous research. Her intuitive and sympathetic attentiveness to Antonia Zabinski’s diaries as well as her clear-headed consideration of the awful march of German and European history gives a reading of this newest work its pulsing life. I feared for the Zabinskis’ lives, those of their brave adult friends, their son, the scores of Jews making their way through the way station of the Warsaw Zoo to sanctums kilometers and galaxies from train cars and furnaces. The Zabinskis were responsible for the saving of at least 300 lives. What is the ripple effect of that number? Had my own parents died before their marriage in 1941, neither I nor my four siblings would have been born. Today that accounts for an additional 60 people.

Before the Germans invaded, Warsaw’s population of 1.3 million included over 300,000 Jews. By war’s end, no one was quite certain how many remained. In all of Poland, the Germans managed to account for the removal, one way or another, of 90% of the prewar Jewish population of three million. Early in her book, Ackerman points out that Hans Frank—Hitler’s man in Warsaw—made clear that any Jews leaving the district to which they had been confined would be killed, as would anyone who would offer hiding to them. Instigators and helpers being subject to death as if they were perpetrators too—attempted acts punished as if they were completed acts.

Over a span of five years, Ackerman reports, 860,000 Jews were resettled, with 75,000 Germans taking over the acquired lands. 1,300,000 Poles were shipped to Germany as slave labor, with another 330,000 being simply shot. The invading Germans, remaining Poles and Jews now stood in bread lines or, rather, three separate lines:

... rationing was calculated down to the last calorie per day,
with Germans receiving 2,613 calories, Poles 669 calories,

and Jews only 184 calories. In case anyone missed the point, German Governor Frank declared: "I ask nothing of the Jews except that they disappear."

As Ackerman efficiently puts it, "Inevitably, a vital paranoia reigned in the house as the only sane response to perpetual danger." Unremitting fear, hunger, heat or cold, sleeplessness, and the constancy of jeopardy ruled.

The Zookeeper's Wife is the story of nearly incomprehensible heroic purpose in the face of nearly incomprehensible peril and brutality. Throughout Nazi-occupied Europe, it was risky to help Jews; in Poland it was fatal. Hitler so targeted Polish Jews that it inspired Heinrich Himmler to conceive "an incomparable birthday present" for the Führer:

... one to elevate him above all others in Hitler's favor. Himmler, who often held intimate conversations with Hitler's photograph and strove to be Hitler's best and most faithful servant, would have lassoed and gift-wrapped the moon if he could. "For him, I would do anything," he once told a friend. "Believe me, if Hitler were to say I should shoot my mother, I would do it and be proud of his confidence." As a gift he swore to liquidate the remaining Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, on April 19, the first day of Passover, an important Jewish holy day, and also the eve of Hitler's birthday.

Himmler's "gift-wrapped massacre became a siege that lasted nearly a month." In the end, as Ackerman reports, 100,000 apartments were torched, as were 5,000 places of industry and shops. Seven thousand Jews were shot outright, with another 22,000 shipped to death camps and several more thousand to labor camps. The Germans captured 9 rifles and 59 pistols. German reports tell us that, in total, some 13,000 Jews perished, many in the fire and ash that the Ghetto became. The same military reports inform that 16 German soldiers died.

The Ghetto Uprising was followed by the Warsaw Uprising that resulted in ferocious street-to-street fighting. But after 63 days, this homeland effort collapsed too:

... what was left of Warsaw's Home Army surrendered, in exchange for the promise of humane treatment as prisoners of war, not partisans. Nonetheless, most survivors were shot, droves were shipped off to slave labor camps, overflowing hospitals were burned with patients still in them, and women

and children were roped onto tanks to prevent ambush from snipers. Hitler celebrated by ordering Germany's churches to ring their bells for a week solid.

Antonia Zabinski wrote that in following the news of the earlier Ghetto Uprising the mood in their villa and the adjoining zoo was "electrified, stunned, helpless, proud"—a predictable reaction for Ackerman's readers. Ackerman's prose is acute and sublime. This is a book of conviction, integrity, and scruple: a book that matters.