



FILM: **THE ZOOKEEPERS WIFE**

FDG RATING: 3.1 ☺☺☺○○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Niki Caro: *Director*

Jessica Chastain: *Actress, Antonina Zabinski*

Johan Heldenbergh: *Actor, Jan Zabinski*

Daniel Brühl, *Actor, Lutz Heck*

DATE: April 23, 2017

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **THE ZOOKEEPERS WIFE**

Some of us were reluctant to see another Holocaust film anticipating horrific scenes of concentration camps but *The Zookeepers Wife* focuses on the hundreds of lives that Antonina and her husband Dr. Jan Zabinski (stewards of the Warsaw Zoo in Poland during Hitler's rise to power) saved from the camps by hiding them in the abandoned underground animal cages. It is a little known, true story about small heroes who took big risks to save the lives of others and unassumingly made a huge impact.

The Warsaw Zoo, one of the largest and most prolific in Europe, flourished under the Zabinski's care and then everything changed when the Germans bombed Warsaw. In contrast to the almost fairytale opening scenes where we see Antonia's pet camel lovingly following her as she makes the rounds on her bicycle to feed the animals and her young son nuzzling baby cubs in his bed, the bombs hit the zoo sending animals running helter-skelter loose down city streets. We know the animals tramping through building rubble and debris from bomb blasts are doomed as we see the Nazis gun down a loose elephant.

Without showing the simultaneous horrific fate of humans, we imagine they are being treated worse than the animals. When we learn that chief Nazi zoologist Lutz Heck (Daniel Bruhl), offers to transport the zoo's surviving "prize animals" to Germany until the war is over, we immediately remember the egregiously shocking experiments by Dr. Mengles. Antonia believes that Heck's gesture will save many of her beloved animals but at the same time she is horrified that the others will be killed. Her husband sees through Heck's charade knowing the prize animals will be used for "selective breeding" to create genetically superior animals.

Putting their own lives at risk, Antonia and Jan convince Heck not to shut down their zoo explaining they would manage it as a pig farm to provide meat for German soldiers. This is the ruse Jan uses to drive to the Warsaw ghetto each day with the pretext of collecting garbage to feed their pigs, and as they leave, sneak a few Jews under the garbage to get them out of the ghetto and then provide a refuge in the underground empty animal cages at their zoo.

Amazingly, all the Jews that stayed in the underground cages survived. Antonina and Jan were actually able to save 144 lives. And what was remarkable is that Antonia would signal when it was safe for them to come out of their hiding space and join Antonia's family in the living room of their home for food and wine to provide brief moments of some semblance of normalcy.

For some of us, the Polish accents sounded a bit fake but others weren't as critical. The "cutesy" opening scenes were too "Disneyesque" for a few of our reviewers who thought they clashed with the starkness of reality. One critical reviewer said the film was too sweet in parts but another disagreed describing the film as a sweet, touching story. An astute observer noted the dramatic emotional effectiveness of the beautiful beginning that contrasted sharply to the almost immediate animal tragedies that followed, preparing us for the human horrors we knew were happening just by seeing what was happening to the animals. Another of our resident critics was dreading that something awful would happen to the families they were hiding or that Heck would do something horrible to Antonina or Jan when he learns about their deceptive scheme. Thankfully, that doesn't happen and the story actually has a somewhat uplifting ending.

Good acting, great cinematography, educational, but the story was a little weak. The characters didn't have a lot of depth and there was no real gripping drama (probably to the relief of most of our film group participants). For this "Holocaust light" film, we managed a lukewarm rating of 3.1 on a scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best).



See you at the movies!

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[Film Discussion Group](#) (FDG) organizer