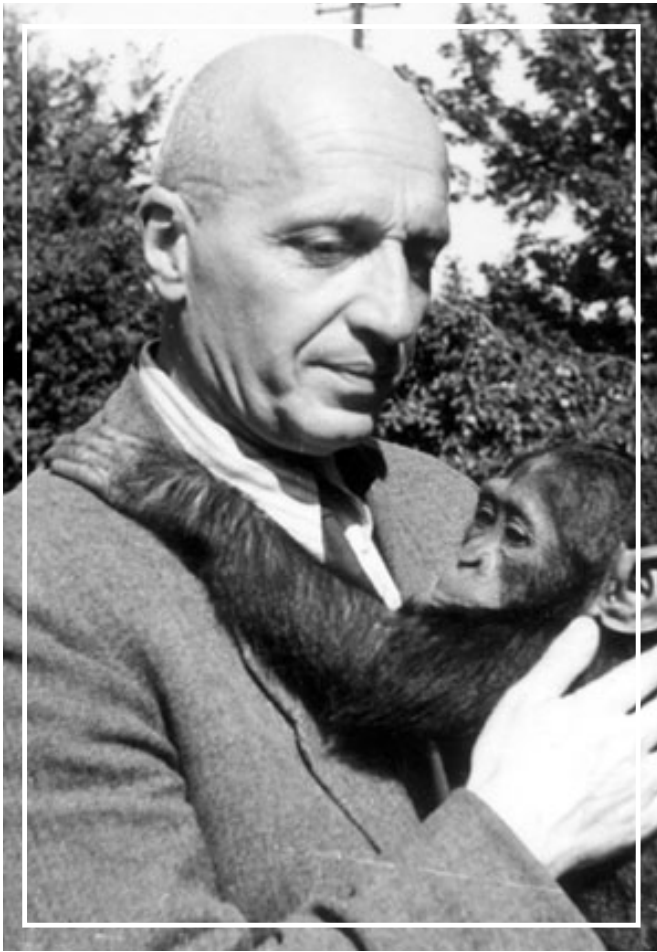


GROUP 5

JAN AND ANTONINA ZABINSKI



Jan and Antonina Zabinski

What motivates a person to risk his life and the lives of his wife and children for strangers whom he mostly has never met? What brings him or her to become caught up in a tangled web of illegal activities, for which the penalty is death? Dr. Jan Zabinski, with his sparkling blue eyes behind his spectacles, answered these questions without hesitation: "I endangered myself and assisted them not because they were Jewish, but because they were persecuted. If the Persecuted had been Germans, I would have behaved the same way. We are talking about innocent people upon whom death had been decreed. It was shocking. I fulfilled a simple human obligation."

When war broke out and the Germans bombed Warsaw, Dr. Jan Zabinski was the head of the Warsaw Zoo. This zoo was one-of-a-kind, sprawling over a vast area. His wife, Antonina, ensured that the zoo grounds were green and beautiful. The heavy bombings of the city destroyed a significant portion of the zoo, and some animals were killed. Two months after the German occupation, the head of the Berlin Zoo, Lutz Heck, visited Warsaw. He knew the Zabinskis from before the war and was friendly with them. This time he came with an order – to transfer all the valuable animals to Germany. Heck told Antonina that this was only a temporary arrangement. Antonina didn't believe a word.

With the cages now empty, the couple needed a pretext to continue running the zoo. Zabinski convinced Heck to convert the zoo into a pig farm, providing food for German soldiers stationed in the Warsaw area. That same year, the Jewish ghetto began to form in the city. After the war, Zabinski testified that when he asked Heck for the permit, he saw an opportunity to smuggle food to his ghetto friends. A few days later, Heck and his men returned to relocate the zoo's animals to various zoos within Germany. The animals that remained were hunted down and killed in cold blood.

The Germans formally tasked Zabinski to be the general supervisor of Warsaw's public parks. Within the Warsaw ghetto there were no parks, but Zabinski visited there anyway, and in this way a food-smuggling network began to form, in which Zabinski played a key part. One day, a member of the Polish underground phoned Zabinski and warned him to "expect guests." This was just the beginning. Slowly the Zabinskis' home filled with many guests: Jews and non-Jews seeking shelter. Many needed temporary shelter until they could procure forged documents. Among those who knocked on their door were Jews who looked "Polish," and were presented to the Zabinskis' maid as family members. Dark-complexioned Jews were transferred to the basement and to empty cages.

The house continued to burst with life. Guests were invited for dinners and musical evenings, as Antonina believed that by creating a general bustle it would be easier to hide people. Not everyone could leave the ghetto on their own, so Zabinski started to enter the ghetto to help smuggle people out, one person at a time. One day, a guard stopped him and asked the person he was smuggling out to identify himself. Zabinski replied coolly, feigning anger at the question, but this did not help. Ultimately, using a forged document from the Parks Authority, he was able to bring the Jew with him. A different time he smuggled out the widow of a friend, a woman named Lunia whose husband, an entomologist named Shimon Tannenbaum, had died in the ghetto. With great effort, they managed to leave the ghetto, but even after leaving, they saw two German soldiers in front of them. Lunia panicked and wanted to start running. Zabinski held her hand, picked up a cigarette butt from the ground, lit it, and, linking arms with her, calmly walked her past them.

Zabinski's name became known amongst the Polish underground, which created a Jewish rescue organization called Żegota. They continued sending Zabinski refugees, who stayed in the cages. In the evenings, Jan and Antonina's son Richard would bring the refugees food, after his father told him: "It's time to feed the peacocks." Among the refugees was the Levy family, who had come to the Zabinskis one evening seeking help. Mr. Levy, a lawyer, along with his wife and daughters, lived in the zoo for two years.

One day in December 1942, there was a knock on the door. Richard rushed to open it. There stood Regina Kenigswein with her two children, aged five and three. Kenigswein's father Sobol had supplied the zoo with fruit before the war. Antonina saw Kenigswein and her eyes filled with tears. She immediately let them into the house. Initially, they stayed in the lions' cage. Zabinski then smuggled Regina's husband Shmuel out of the ghetto. Regina later recalled, "In those days the zoo was like Noah's Ark – full of people in great flood."

"In that period," Jan Zabinski later described, "I was involved in all sorts of various activities, and the Germans had many reasons to hang me. Among other things, I lectured at illegally-run Polish universities, I was active in the Polish underground, and my zoo had an arms cache – so hiding Jews did not raise or reduce my level of danger... the true hero was my wife. The Jews were in her house all the time and she took care of their well-being and their needs, without complaint and without tiring, despite the constant fear we always felt."

In the summer of 1944, Poles rebelled in the city. Zabinski was injured in the battles, and later was taken captive by the Germans. Antonina was left alone with a four-month-old daughter and her young son, and on top of that agreed to take charge of the two Jewish daughters of the Levy family. Together they covered 120 kilometers on foot, Antonina with

four small children. By the time she reached the town of Lubich, she could no longer feed the children. Miraculously, her situation became known to the Jewish committee that still existed in Warsaw. Through one of the committee's operatives, they managed to secretly deliver money to her.

In the years following the war, Jan Zabinski continued to run the Warsaw Zoo. Even after retiring, he carried on working with animals – preferring to speak about his love for them, rather than be asked about his all-encompassing love for humankind.

Discussion Questions:

- What motivated Jan and Antonina Zabinski's acts of rescue?
- Describe the rescuers: age, gender, political and religious outlook, etc.
- What difficulties and dangers did they face?
- Was the rescue a result of a one-time decision or perhaps were Jan and Antonina Zabinski called upon to take responsibility for rescuing at several points? If the latter, what were they?

