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## Review of *The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story*, by Diane Ackerman Jordan Rowe

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Diane Ackerman's *The Zookeeper's Wife* is the true story of Jan and Antonina Żabiński's experiences from the German invasion of Poland in 1939 through the duration of the Second World War. Ackerman typically focuses on the natural world, so the result of *The Zookeeper's Wife* is a genre-bending piece that mixes historical, biographical, and naturalistic themes. The author relies on extensive research and Antonina's diary to use the Żabińskis as a window into this tumultuous and painful period. Before the war, the couple ran a popular zoo in Warsaw. With the invasion of Poland, bombings killed most of the exotic animals and the rest were seized by Nazis. The racist Aryan views espoused by Hitler reached even to the "racial purity" of animals. Antonina saw the Nazis violent acts towards the creatures as a foreshadowing of violence to come. The couple received permission to turn their empty zoo into a pig farm, and from there the Żabińskis began to fight against the Nazis on their own terms.

Jan joined the Polish resistance. He smuggled food and other items into the Warsaw ghetto and sometimes smuggled people out. The Żabińskis had a steady stream of friends and family visiting them, providing cover for smuggling Jews. At a time when even giving a Jew water was punishable by death, the couple lived a tense existence and took great risks. Yet, under the Żabińskis, the zoo remained a positive sanctuary. Unlike the depressing bunkers where many Jews hid, Antonina wrote about the upbeat and pleasant atmosphere with music in the evenings. Antonina served sit-down meals and fretted over the emotional needs of her guests. The Żabińskis even managed to keep some zoo animals. They refused to lose their sense of connection to the world. Despite the chaos around them, the Żabińskis saved the lives of approximately three hundred Polish Jews.

Ackerman provides an extensive bibliography from her research, including a report written by Jan and the diary of Antonina. The diary is a significant part of the book and Ackerman's source for the personal details described. The author also explains in her introduction how she used photographs to help her describe some of the physical characteristics of Jan and Antonina. Ackerman is known for her extremely detailed descriptions, and this is noticeable in *The Zookeeper's Wife*. While not an historian, the author developed an interesting method of retelling a story in a historical way while using naturalistic themes. Ackerman is an essayist and poet who typically writes nonfiction pieces about the natural world.

Ackerman's book is reminiscent of stories such as *Schindler's List* that describe human empathy during dark times. The story of the Żabińskis and their zoo is intertwined with the larger picture of the Second World War. She writes with rich detail that keeps the reader locked into the narrative.