For Antonina and her family,
human and animal

The Zookeeper's Wife--copyright page

Printed in the United States of America
First published as a Norton paperback 2008

Manufacturing by RR Donnelley, Harrisonburg
Book design by Barbara M. Bachman
Production manager: Andrew Marasia

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Ackerman, Diane.
The zookeeper's wife : a war story / Diane Ackerman. — 1st ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-393-06172-7 (hardcover)
1. Jews—Poland—Warsaw. 2. Righteous Gentiles in the Holocaust—
Poland—Warsaw. 3. Holocaust, Jewish (1939–1945)—Poland—Warsaw.
4. World War, 1939–1945—Jews—Rescue—Poland—Warsaw. 5. Zoo keepers—
Poland—Warsaw. 6. Warsaw (Poland)—Ethnic relations. I. Title.
DS134.64.A25 2007
940.53'18350943841—dc22

2007012635

ISBN 978-0-393-33306-0 pbk.

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110
www.wwnorton.com

This excerpt presents information about the invasion of Warsaw

squadrons escorting the approaching German army. We've got to leave right away." With Ryś and his nanny safe in Rejentówka, they decided to head first to the nearer village of Zalesie, where his cousins lived, but waited for further updates on the radio.

start here This was the first day of the school year for Polish children, a day when the sidewalks should have been streaming with school uniforms and knapsacks. From the terrace, they saw Polish soldiers sprinting in all directions—down the streets, over lawns, even into the zoo—erecting balloon barriers, aligning antiaircraft guns, and piling long black cannon shells tapered at one end like animal droppings.

The zoo animals seemed unaware of danger. Small fires didn't scare them—for years they'd trusted the sight of household bonfires—but they grew alarmed by the sudden flood of soldiers, because the only humans they'd ever seen in early morning were the dozen or so blue-uniformed keepers, usually with food. The lynxes began gargling a sound between roar and meow, the leopards chug-chugged low notes, the chimpanzees yipped, the bears brayed like donkeys, and the jaguar sounded as though it were hacking up something lodged in its throat.

By 9 A.M., they'd learned that, to justify invasion, Hitler had staged a phony attack on the German border town of Gleiwitz, where SS troops dressed in Polish uniforms commandeered a local radio station and broadcast a fake call to arms against Germany. Although foreign journalists imported to witness the events were shown dead bodies of prisoners (dressed in Polish uniforms) as proof of hostilities, no one fell for the charade. Still, even such a hoax couldn't go unanswered, and at 4 A.M. Germany's battleship *Schleswig-Holstein*

bombarded an ammunition depot near Gdańsk, and Russia's Red Army started preparing to invade from the east.

Antonina and Jan packed hurriedly and set out on foot across the bridge, hoping to make their way to Zalesie, beyond the Vistula River and only a dozen miles to the southeast. As they approached Zbawiciel Square, the engine noise ground louder and then planes floated overhead, appearing in the gap between the rooftops like stereopticon slides. Bombs whistled down and struck a few streets in front of them, with black smoke followed by the crackling of shattered stucco roof tiles and the rasp of brick and mortar crumbling.

Every bomb creates a different scent, depending on where it hits, what it boils into aerosol and the nose detects slipping apart, as molecules mix with air and float free. Then the nose can pick up ten thousand distinctive scents, from cucumber to violin resin. When a bakery was hit, the rising dirt cloud smelled of yeast sours, eggs, molasses, and rye. The mingled odors of cloves, vinegar, and burning flesh spelled the butcher's. Charred flesh and pine meant an incendiary bomb that blasted houses with a hot, fast fire, and that the people inside had died quickly.

"We've got to turn back," Jan said, and they ran past the walls of Old Town and across the whistling metal bridge. At the zoo once more, Antonina noted: "I was so depressed that I couldn't do anything. I could only hear Jan's voice directing his staff: 'Bring a cart with horses, load it with food and coal, pack warm clothes, and go immediately. . . .' "

FOR JAN, THE PUZZLE of finding a town of no military interest posed an equation littered with unknowns he wasn't prepared for, since neither he nor Antonina had thought the Germans

would invade Poland. They'd worried, but agreed "it was only fear speaking": a private siege, not signs of an impending war. Antonina wondered how they could have guessed so wrong, and Jan concentrated on hiding his family somewhere safe while he remained at the zoo to tend the animals as long as possible and await orders.

"Warsaw will soon be closed," he reasoned, "and the German army is advancing from the east, so I think it's best if you return to the cottage in Rejentówka."

She pondered this, then decided, despite misgivings: "Yes, at least it's a place we know, one Ryś associates with good times." Really, she had no idea, but persisted in packing, relying on Jan's hunch, then climbed into a cart loaded for what might be a long absence, and set out quickly before the roads grew too crowded.

The resort village of Rejentówka lay only about twenty-five miles away, but Antonina and a cart driver spent seven hours en route, sharing the dirt road with thousands of people, mainly on foot, since cars, trucks, and most horses had been confiscated by the military. Women, children, and old men hurried along in a worried trance, escaping the city with whatever they could carry, some pushing baby buggies, wagons, and hand trolleys, some hauling suitcases and small children, but most wearing several layers of clothing, with knapsacks, bags, and shoes slung across their bodies or swinging from their necks.

Flanking the road, tall poplars, pine, and spruce juggled large brown balls of mistletoe in their limbs; and black-and-white storks nested atop the telephone poles, still fattening up for their arduous flight to Africa. Soon farm fields quilted both sides of the road, grain glistening and tassels pointing skyward. Antonina wrote of sweat pouring in rivulets and breath bunching, the air clotted with dust.

A storm's distant rumble became a cloud of gnats on the horizon; then grew to German aircraft looming near in seconds, chewing up the skies, flying low overhead, panicking people and horses alike. Pelted by bullets, everyone hurried through clouds of flying dirt, the unlucky fell, and the relatively lucky fled beneath splattering machine-gun fire. Dead storks, redwings, and rooks littered the road along with tree branches and dropped satchels. Catching a bullet was sheer chance and for seven hours Antonina beat the odds, but not without scenes of the dead and dying etched into memory.

At least her son, in Rejentówka, was spared these images, so hard to erase, especially for a small child whose brain, busily sampling the world, was learning what to expect and stitching those truths in place at a trillion connections. *Stay prepared for this world the rest of your life*, a child's brain tells itself, *a world of mayhem and uncertainty*. "That which doesn't kill you, makes you stronger," Nietzsche wrote in *The Twilight of the Idols*, as if the will could be annealed like a Samurai sword that is heated and pounded, bent and reforged, until it becomes indestructible. But the metal of a little boy, what does the pounding do to him? Mixed with Antonina's worry about her son was moral outrage that the Germans "in this modern war, so different from wars we knew, allowed the killing of women, children, and civilians."

As the dust settled, blue sky returned and she noticed two Polish fighters attacking a heavy German bomber above a field. From afar, the geometry of the scene looked homely, like fierce wrens driving off a hawk, and people cheered whenever the fighters stung the bomber with tufts of smoke. Surely an

air force that agile could repel the Luftwaffe? Threads of tinsel flashed in the waning sunlight, and suddenly the bomber gushed a fountain of blood-red flames and fell to earth in a sharp curve. Then a white jellyfish floated above the peaks of the pine trees: a German pilot swaying under his parachute, slowly descending through a cornflower-blue sky.

Like many Poles, Antonina didn't realize the magnitude of danger, relying instead on a Polish air force that boasted superbly trained and famously courageous pilots (especially those of the Pursuit Brigade defending Warsaw), whose outnumbered, obsolete PZL P.11 fighters posed no match for Germany's fast, swervy Junkers JU-87 Stukas. Polish Karas bombers swooped low over German tanks at such a slow speed, while flying level, that they fell easy prey to antiaircraft fire. She didn't know that Germany was testing out a new form of combined-arms warfare which would come to be called *Blitzkrieg* (lightning war), a charge-in-with-everything-you've-got—tanks, planes, cavalry, artillery, infantry—to surprise and terrify the enemy.

When she finally arrived in Rejentówka, she found a ghost town with summer guests gone, shops shuttered for the season, and even the post office closed. Exhausted, rattled, and dirty, she rode to the cottage hemmed in by tall trees and luminous quiet, in a setting that smelled familiar and safe, full of the mingled aromas of loam, meadow herbs and wild grasses, decaying wood and pine oil. One can picture her hugging Ryś hard and greeting his nanny; eating a dinner of buckwheat, potatoes, and soup; unpacking; bathing; longing for the habitual routines of just another summer, but unable to calm her nerves or quell her sense of foreboding.

Over the next few days, they often stood on the porch

watching waves of German planes, en route to Warsaw, blacken the sky in lines neat as hedgerows. The regularity addled her: each day planes swarmed above at 5 A.M. and again after sunset, without her knowing whom exactly they had bombed.

The local landscape looked strange, too, since Rejentówka wasn't a spot they visited in autumn, without vacationers and pets. Tall lindens had begun turning bronze and oaks the burnt maroon of stale blood, while some green survived on the maples, where yellow-bellied evening grosbeaks fed on winged seeds. Along the sandy roads, staghorn sumac shrubs raised antler-velvet twigs and cone-shaped clusters of hairy red fruits. Blue chicory, brown cat-o'-nine-tails, white dame's rocket, pink thistle, orange hawkweed, and goldenrod tuned the meadows to fall, in a tableau that changed whenever a breeze bent the stems like a hand gliding over a plush carpet.

On September 5, Jan arrived by train, his face somber, to find Antonina "very depressed and confused."

"I've heard rumors that a wing of the German army, invading from East Prussia, will soon reach Rejentówka," he told her. "But the front hasn't arrived in Warsaw yet, and people are slowly getting used to the air raids. Our army is bound to protect the capital at all costs, so we may as well return home."

Even if he didn't sound altogether convinced, Antonina agreed, in part because Jan was a good strategist whose hunches usually panned out, but she also thought how much easier life would be if they could stay together, sharing comforts, worries, and fears. Traveling the main road again was out of the question.

At night, they boarded a slow train with blackened windows and arrived in civil morning twilight, the hour of bright-

ening before the sun spills over the horizon, in a lull between the night and dawn raids. According to Antonina, horses awaited them at the station and they rode home bewitched by the everyday—windless calm, damp air, aster hedges, colorful leaves, squeaky axles, clopping hooves on cobblestone—and, for a short spell, they slipped into the premechanized past, sinking deep into a pristine stillness where the war seemed to her muffled and unreal, only a remote glow like the moon.

At the main gate in Praga, the toll smacked her wide awake again as she dismounted. Bombs had ripped up the asphalt, shells had bitten large chunks out of the wooden buildings, cannon wheels had furrowed the lawns, old willows and lindens dangled unplugged limbs. Antonina held Ryś tight, as if the desolation before her were communicable. Unfortunately, the zoo edged a river with busy bridges, prime German targets, and with a Polish battalion stationed there, it had made a superb target, repeatedly, over several days. Picking their way through debris, they walked to the villa and its bomb-cratered yard. Antonina's eyes fell to the flower beds crushed from the hooves of horses, and she fixed on the small delicate calyxes of flowers stomped into the ground "like colorful teardrops."

Just after dawn, the day and battle started heating up. Standing on the front porch, they were surprised by the canyon echoing of hoarse explosions and snapping iron girders. Suddenly the ground trembled and walked under their feet, and they hurried indoors, only to find the roof beams, floors, and walls all shaking. The moaning of lions and yowling of tigers spiraled from the big cat house, where she knew cat mothers, "crazy with fear, were grabbing their young by the scruff of the neck and pacing their cages, anxiously looking for a safe place to hide them." The elephants trumpeted wildly,

the hyenas sobbed in a frightened sort of giggle interrupted by hiccups, the African hunting dogs howled, and the rhesus monkeys, agitated beyond sanity, battled one another, their hysterical shrieks clawing the air. Despite the uproar, workers continued to carry water and food to the animals and check their cage bars and locks.

In this Luftwaffe attack, a half-ton bomb destroyed the polar bears' mountain, smashing the walls, moats, and barriers and freeing the terrified animals. When a platoon of Polish soldiers found the panicky bears, ribboned with blood and circling round their old haunt, they quickly shot them. Then, fearing lions, tigers, and other dangerous animals might escape, too, the soldiers decided to kill the most aggressive ones, including the male elephant, Jaś, Tuzinka's father.

Watching from the front porch, Antonina had a good view across the grounds to where Polish soldiers gathered beside a well, with several zoo workers crowding around them, one crying, the others grim and silent.

"How many animals have they already killed?" she asked herself.

Events were unfolding without time to protest or grieve, and the surviving animals needed help, so she and Jan joined the keepers in feeding, doctoring, and calming animals as best they could.

"At least humans can pack their essentials, keep moving, keep improvising," Antonina thought. "If Germany occupies Poland, what will become of the delicate life-form of the zoo? . . . The zoo animals are in a much worse situation than we are," she lamented, "because they're totally dependent on us. Moving the zoo to a different location is unimaginable; it's too complex an organism." Even if war should erupt and end fast,

continue to next page

Ryś would survive the night, if she'd live to see Jan again, if her son would celebrate another birthday. "Every day of our life was full of thoughts of the horrible present, and even our own death," she wrote in her memoirs, adding:

> Our allies were not here, not helping us—we Poles were all alone [when] one English attack on the Germans could stop the constant bombing of Warsaw. . . . We were receiving very depressing news about our Polish government—our Marshal Śmigly and members of the government had escaped to Romania and were captured and arrested. We felt betrayed, shocked, we were grieving.

When Britain and France declared war on Germany, Poles rejoiced and radio stations played the French and British national anthems endlessly for days, but mid-September brought no relief from the relentless bombing and heavy artillery. "Living in a city under siege," Antonina wrote disbelievingly in her memoirs, a city full of whistling bombs, jarring explosions, the dry thunder of collapse, and hungry people. First routine comforts like water and gas disappeared, then radio and newspapers. Whoever dared the streets only did so at a run, and people risked their lives to stand in line for a little horsemeat or bread. For three weeks she heard shells zinging over rooftops by day and bombs pounding on walls of darkness at night. Chilling whistles preceded horrible booms, and Antonina found herself listening for each whistle to end, fearing the worst, then letting her breath out when she heard someone else's life exploding. Without trying, she gauged the distance and felt relief that she wasn't the

bomb's target, then almost at once came the next whistle, the next blast.

On the rare occasions she ventured out, she entered a film-like war, with yellow smoke, pyramids of rubble, jagged stone cliffs where buildings once stood, wind-chased letters and medicine vials, wounded people, and dead horses with oddly angled legs. But nothing more unreal than this: hovering overhead, what looked at first like snow but didn't move like snowflakes, something delicately rising and falling without landing. Eerier than a blizzard, a bizarre soft cloud of down feathers from the city's pillows and comforters gently swirled above the buildings. Once, long ago, a Polish king repelled invading Turks by attaching large feathered hoops to each soldier's back. As they galloped into battle, the wind coursed through the false wings with a loud tornadic whirring that spooked the enemy's horses, which dug in their hooves and refused to advance. For many Warsawians, this feather storm may have conjured up the slaughter of those knights, the city's guardian angels.

One day, after a live shell plunged into her building and stuck in the fourth-floor ceiling, she waited for an explosion that never came. That night, while bombs sprayed smoke ropes across the sky, she moved Ryś to the basement of a nearby church. Then, "in the strangled silence of the morning," she moved Ryś back again to the lampshade store. "I'm just like our lioness," she told the others, "fearfully moving my cub from one side of the cage to the other."

No news came of Jan, and the worry allowed her little sleep, but she told herself that she would fail him if she didn't save the zoo's remaining animals. Were they even alive, she wondered, and could the teenage boys left in charge really

look after them? There seemed no choice: though queasy from fear, she left Ryś with her sister-in-law and forced herself to cross the river amid gunfire and shells. "This is how a hunted animal feels," she thought, caught in the melee, "not like a heroine, just madly driven to get home safely at any cost." She remembered the death of Jaś and the big cats, shot point-blank by Polish soldiers. Visions of their last moments tortured her, and perhaps a fright harder to dispel: What if they turned out to be the lucky ones?

CHAPTER 6

Nazi bombers attacked Warsaw in 1150 sorties, devastating the zoo, which happened to lie near antiaircraft guns. On that clear day, the sky broke open and whistling fire hurtled down, cages exploded, moats rained upward, iron bars squealed as they wrenched apart. Wooden buildings collapsed, sucked down by heat. Glass and metal shards mutilated skin, feathers, hooves, and scales indiscriminately as wounded zebras ran, ribboned with blood, terrified howler monkeys and orangutans dashed caterwauling into the trees and bushes, snakes slithered loose, and crocodiles pushed onto their toes and trotted at speed. Bullets ripped open the aviary nets and parrots spiraled upward like Aztec gods and plummeted straight down, other tropicals hid in the shrubs and trees or tried to fly with singed wings. Some animals, hiding in their cages and basins, became engulfed by rolling waves of flame. Two giraffes lay dead on the ground, legs twisted, shockingly horizontal. The clotted air hurt to breathe and stank of burning wood, straw, and flesh. The monkeys and birds, screeching infernally, created an otherworldly chorus backed by a crackling timpani of bullets and bomb blasts. Echoing around the zoo, the tumult surely sounded like ten thousand Furies scratching up from hell to unhinge the world.

Antonina and a handful of keepers ran through the grounds, trying to rescue some animals and release others, while dodging injury themselves. Running from one cage to the next, she also worried about her husband, fighting at the front, "a brave man, a man of conscience; if even innocent animals aren't safe, what hope has he?" And when he returned, what would he find? Then another thought collided: Where was Kasia, the mother elephant, one of their favorites? At last she arrived at Kasia's enclosure, only to discover it leveled and her gone (already killed by a shell, Antonina would later learn), but she could hear two-year-old baby Tuzinka trumpeting in the distance. Many monkeys had died in a pavilion fire or were shot, and others hooted wildly as they scampered through the shrubs and trees.

Miraculously, some animals survived at the zoo and many escaped across the bridge, entering Old Town while the capital burned. People brave enough to stand by their windows, or unlucky enough to be outside, watched a biblical hallucination unfolding as the zoo emptied into Warsaw's streets. Seals waddled along the banks of the Vistula, camels and llamas wandered down alleyways, hooves skidding on cobblestone, ostriches and antelope trotted beside foxes and wolves, anteaters called out *hatchee, hatchee* as they scuttled over bricks. Locals saw blurs of fur and hide bolting past factories and apartment houses, racing to outlying fields of oats, buckwheat, and flax, scrambling into creeks, hiding in stairwells and sheds. Submerged in their wallows, the hippos, otters, and beavers survived. Somehow the bears, bison, Przywalski horses, camels, zebras, lynxes, peacocks and other birds, monkeys, and reptiles survived, too.

Antonina wrote of stopping a young soldier near the villa and asking: "Have you seen a large badger?"

He said: "Some badger banged and scratched on the villa door for a long time, but when we didn't let it in, it disappeared through the bushes."

"Poor Badger," she lamented as she pictured the family pet's frightened appeals at the door. After a moment, "I hope he managed to escape" clouded her mind, the heat and smoke resumed, her legs returned, and she ran to check on the bristle-maned horses from Mongolia. The other horses and donkeys—including her son's pony, Figlarz (Prankster)—lay dead in the streets, but somehow the rare Przywalski horses trembled upright in their pasture.

Antonia finally left the zoo and crossed Praski Park, between rows of linden trees haloed in fire, and headed back to the lampshade store downtown where she and her son sheltered. Blurred and drained, she tried to describe the plumes of smoke, the uprooted trees and grass, the blood-splattered buildings and carcasses. Then, when she felt a little calmer, she made her way to a stone building at No. 1 Miodowa Street and climbed the stairs to a small office crammed with agitated people and cascading piles of documents, one of the Resistance's secret lairs, where she met an old friend, Adam Englert.

"Any news?"

"Apparently, our army is out of ammunition and supplies, and discussing official surrender," he said bleakly.

In her memoirs, she wrote that she heard him speak, but his words floated away from her; it was as if her brain, already choked by the day's horrors, had issued a *non serviam* and refused to absorb any more.

Sitting down heavily on a couch, she felt glued in place. Until this moment, she hadn't let herself believe that her country might really lose its independence. Again. If occupation

XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

stop here.