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'Zookeeper's Wife' builds strong drama from a true story

Some knock Holocaust tale as tame, but this film highlights Nazis' use of sexual violence

"The Zookeeper's Wife," directed by Nicki Caro ("Whale Rider," "McFarland, USA") has been unfairly criticized as presenting a "Disneyfied" version of the Holocaust.

In fact, it is a beautifully photographed, solidly crafted, war drama based on the little-known true story of Antonina (Jessica Chastain) and Jan Zabinski (Johan Heldenbergh), the keepers of the Warsaw Zoo, who sheltered and helped more than 300 Jews escape the Nazi occupation of Poland.

Chastain gives a seamless performance as the Russian-born Antonina. Heldenbergh, who is also a playwright and director, is as strong, silent and weathered as Sam Shepard.

The story begins in the summer of 1939 with Antonina rousing her young son, who sleeps with baby lion cubs in his bed, before riding

her bike through the zoo, greeting its animal inhabitants as if they are friendly neighbors in a small town. The zoo is modern, with outdoor spaces and fences rather than cages and, in the moments before the gates open, it is Eden.

The Zabinskis host a gathering of European zookeepers attended by Lutz Heck (Daniel Bruhl),

In [this film], the love story is between Antonina Zabinski and the animals of the Warsaw Zoo.

keeper of the Berlin Zoological Garden. He flirts with Antonina, a former musician, whose path may have crossed his in the past.

Like a self-satisfied Hemingway character on safari, Heck straightaway establishes his Nazi cred by telling the story of shooting a



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ghostly and beautiful black panther at his zoo — punctuating the tale with a stomp of his boot, piercing as a gunshot.

When the bombing of Warsaw begins, the zoo's animals are scattered, mangled or killed. Heck, now Hitler's head zoologist, informs the Zabinskis that due to the war effort, their zoo will be

liquidated for meat, firewood and soap. He "offers" to provide sanctuary at the Berlin Zoo for the prize specimens. His men return to shoot the rest.

Antonina entreats Heck to convert the zoo into a pig farm to supply the occupying German

troops, using garbage from the Jewish Ghetto to feed the swine. The pig farm keeps the zoo alive and provides cover for Jan to sneak Jews out of the ghetto, hidden under the garbage in his truck. He releases them into the underground passages beneath the couple's house before dispatching them to safe houses.

With Jan mostly away, Antonina minds what's left of the zoo, where Heck — in an actual Nazi breeding project initiated under Nazi party leader Hermann Goring's patronage — uses the zoo premises to "recreate" the ancient aurochs, a wild European bovine extinct since 1672.

Smitten, Heck clearly expects a carnal quid pro quo for the lenience he grants Antonina. There is muted ambiguity as to the degree of her acquiescence.

This question of sex is important because "The Zookeeper's Wife" (rated PG-13 and starring, written and directed by women) is one of few films, even about the Holocaust, that acknowledges the use of sexual coercion and rape as Nazi tools of terror and entitlement.

In order to confront us with horrifying material, some films — "Life is Beautiful," for example, or "Slumdog Millionaire" — place a love story at the movie's spine.

Without that path to follow, we, the audience, would lose hope.

In "The Zookeeper's Wife," the love story is between Antonina Zabinski and the animals of the Warsaw Zoo.