

# **OF ANIMALS AND MEN**

**THE TRUE STORY behind “THE ZOOKEEPER’S WIFE”  
with Jessica Chastain  
USA THEATRICAL RELEASE: 22 JUNE 2021**

## **LOGLINE**

**A unique story of Warsaw Zoo, an inconspicuous refuge for Jews during WWII.**

**The key aim of every zoo is to protect animal species from extinction.  
In times of war, the most endangered species was the man.**

**The documentary film about Jan and Antonina Żabiński who saved about 300 people, mostly Jews, in the Warsaw Zoo during the WWII is an exciting story about humanity that has no price and needs no acknowledgement.**

## **GENRE**

**Documentary**

## **Concept**

**Behind the Nazis' backs, about 300 people, mostly Jews, were saved by Jan and Antonina Żabiński in the Warsaw Zoo during WWII. The surreal atmosphere of those poignant events is revived by means of reenacted scenes with animals, interviews with the survivors, archive footage featuring the Zoo, the Żabiński family, and their villa.**

**The film's narrator is Antonina Żabińska who tells the story of her family and the Zoo. She reflects on people and animals she was attached to as well as the situation at the Zoo before and during WWII. She also provides moving comments on wartime Warsaw and Poland.**

## SYNOPSIS

Every zoo aims to protect animal species from extinction. During WWII, the Warsaw Zoo carried out its function in a rebellious manner. Once the war began, the Nazis killed some animals and transferred the others to the Third Reich. The abandoned enclosures were taken over by the species most endangered by warfare: the man. The Jews escaping the inevitable death and the Home Army soldiers found shelter in the empty stables, kennels, and aviaries as well as in the house of Jan Żabiński, the then Zoo director. People were also smuggled out of the ghetto by Jan Żabiński. The couple hid the escapees in their villa and in animal cages. The film director focuses on a unique comparison as the extraordinary couple's daughter shares her memories: the people who remained in hiding were given nicknames related to their hideout, without a hint of mockery. Thus, those who stayed in a pheasant coop became 'Pheasants', others were called 'Squirrels' or 'Hamsters'. The Zoo offered a hiding place to several hundred people, sometimes for a day or rarely for a few months. The exact number remains unknown. The film creators try to tell this incredible story by means of metaphorical shots of animals, abundant archive footage, and interviews with the last living witnesses.

## ABOUT THE FILM

**The film presents the story of the Żabiński family, the long-standing keepers of the Warsaw Zoo, already presented in Niki Caro's *The Zookeeper's Wife*.** Yet, the story is so unique that it's worth to be told again in the form of a documentary. Its creator, Łukasz Czajka, interweaves archive footage with memories of the living witnesses to those events, helping the viewers understand the wartime fear and the heroism of the Żabiński family. Formally, the entire film is set inside the Zoo or parks that resemble the Zoo.

The outbreak of the war ceased Zoo's dynamic development. The Germans deported to the Reich the most unique animals, such as bison, which were hoped to be used to recreate the aurochs, an extinct species of large wild cattle that died out in the 17th century. They also deported camels, hippos, elephants, and tarpans. The animals which remained in the Zoo were killed by the Nazis during hunting trips organized for entertainment. The Zoo without animals ceased to exist. In 1940, on the Zoo premises, a pig fattening house was opened for the needs of the local population. Later, a fox farm and allotment gardens were established there as well. Despite such a dramatic situation, the Żabiński family lived on and off in their villa located at the heart of the Zoo almost throughout the entire WWII. In addition, they kept conducting underground activities there, despite the proximity of German checkpoints, a weapon storehouse and Germans walking around the Zoo premises.

**In Czajka's film, the zoo keepers' unique heroism feels fairly common. It seems the Żabiński family might have liked that image of themselves, devoid of a flashy patriotic attitude, elevated words, or glamorous simplifications. *Of Animals and Men* is primarily a story about humanity, with heroism being only its part.**

The movie begins a few years before WWII, when the Zoo is up and running. People live among animals. The Żabiński family resides in their villa located in the centre of the Zoo. They share their house with winged and furry creatures and invite them into their rooms and even beds. It is a perfect coexistence based on love and fascination. However, the idyllic scenery is cruelly shattered by the

invasion of the German army. Bombs destroy not only the Zoo buildings, but also they kill its inhabitants: giraffes, antelopes, monkeys.

The sight of dead animals affects viewers' imagination, who have become almost indifferent to ever-present images of human suffering and death. Dead giraffes, elephants or antelopes are only symbols that make the viewers more sensitive to people being killed. Their presence on screen intensifies the absurdity of war, which does not choose its victims.

**Paradoxically, *Of Animals and Men* is a movie about life and kindness, not about death and evilness.**



*“Of Animals and Men is definitely one of the most interesting Polish films of the past year. The excellent usage of archive footage, Jakub Piątek’s first-rate editing, and Marcin Masecki’s music make Łukasz Czajka’s documentary truly memorable. If Polish cinema wants to discuss historical issues, it should do it in exactly this clever and mature manner.”*

*excerpts from reviews by Bartosz Staszczyszyn – [www.culture.pl](http://www.culture.pl) and Michał Przepiórka – [www.blizejekranu.pl](http://www.blizejekranu.pl)*

## CHARACTERS

**Jan Żabiński** was an outstanding Polish zoologist, a radio journalist, an author of books, a soldier of the Home Army, and above all, the director of the Warsaw Zoo in years 1928-1954. Before the outbreak of WWII, thanks to his passion and perseverance as well as the commitment of his wife Antonina, the then 10-year-old Warsaw Zoo was admired by whole Europe and eagerly visited by the inhabitants of Warsaw. As a member of the Home Army, Jan was involved in the production of explosives, but he showed even greater heroism during other operations. Despite the threat of death penalty, the Żabiński family helped Jews by hiding them in the basement of their villa and in empty animal cages. In 1965, Jan and Antonina were awarded the title of "Righteous Among the Nations" for their activities. Their villa is open for visitors until today.

**Antonina Żabinska** spent the first years of her life in Russia where her father, Antoni, worked as a railway engineer. In 1917, as a 9 year-old girl, she lost both of her parents – members of the intelligentsia, who were murdered by the revolutionaries. Antonina fled to Tashkent together with her aunt, who took the young orphaned girl under her care. Later Antonina studied piano at the music conservatory. At the age of 15 Antonina came to Warsaw, where she studied languages as well as drawing and painting. She worked as a tutor, studied archival science, which eventually enabled her to get a job at the Warsaw School of Life Sciences.

<https://sprawiedliwi.org.pl/en/stories-of-rescue/story-rescue-zabinski-family>

**Moshe Tirosh**, a Jew who survived thanks to hiding in the Warsaw Zoo, and **Krzysztof Prochaska**, a man whose mother found shelter in the Zoo.

**Teresa Żabińska** - Jan and Antonina's daughter.

**Animals** - voiceless characters in the film; the viewers can see how the animals deal with the cruelty of war (a terrified lion or monkeys watching the Zoo being bombed).

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



***Of Animals and Men*** is a creative documentary telling the story of what happened in the Warsaw Zoo before and during WWII. The film's main characters are Jan Żabiński, the Zoo's creator and its long-time director, and his wife Antonina Żabińska. In wartime, they offered refuge to the Jews and Polish resistance fighters by hiding them in the desolate Zoo, specifically, in their own Villa and empty back rooms of animal enclosures. In total, they managed to shelter about three hundred people, the exact number remains unknown. The secret guests used to stay in the Zoo from a few days to many months.

The story of the Żabiński family, their wartime actions, their villa in the Warsaw Zoo, and the people they saved is very important to me. I've had this story on my mind for a few years, since the moment I heard it.

Why is the story so important to me?

**Firstly**, their decency. The Żabiński family humane attitude is reflected in Jan's reply to the question why he saved the Jews: 'Every decent Pole had to rebel against the Nazis' brutal treatment of the Jews.' Such decency in the German-occupied Poland was punishable by the death of the helper and their family.

**Secondly**, their genuine love for animals. Their villa was always full of them, even after the closure of the Zoo. Apart from cats and dogs, there were fox cubs raised by a cat, rabbits, parrots, a badger, a rooster, a muskrat, a hamster, female lynxes, and many other species. Since his birth, Ryszard, the Żabińskis' son, grew up in the company of animal babies of other household members.

This coexistence of humans and animals at war created an unusual, surreal atmosphere, which is also the reason why I am so personally attached to this story. The Żabiński villa was known as the villa "Under the crazy star", because it was almost always full of rescuers during the war. Antonina, despite hiding Jews, ran an open house, so most often someone visited the family, and it was often pretty noisy. When a stranger came home, she would sit at the piano and play the aria "Ride to Crete" from the operetta "Beautiful Helena", so the hiders could hear it and stay quiet. According to several sources, all the Jews who found rescue in the villa, survived the war. These are the main reasons why I decided to make this film.

**Thirdly**, the Żabińskis' courage. Using false documents, Jan walked Jews out of the ghetto and into the Zoo, where he offered them shelter in the basement of the villa or animal cages on the Zoo premises. And he did it behind the backs of Nazi officers stationing nearby! To minimize the danger of exposure, people hidden in the villa often did not know about each other.

Jan and his wife Antonina did what it was expected to do, they protected an endangered animal species from extinction.

I am convinced that while telling this story, we cannot ignore its 'animal' dimension since the Zoo is an animal kingdom after all. That is why, animals will be the film's main characters, performing roles of the people hiding in the Zoo during WWII.

## **DIRECTOR'S BIO**

**Łukasz Czajka** was born in Warsaw. He is a graduate of Wajda School. He also holds degrees in Political Science from the University of Warsaw and the Centre for Latin American Studies. He's an experienced TV reporter as well as a creator and designer of video games, which have been translated into a dozen foreign languages. For four years, he's been fascinated by the story of the Żabiński family and wartime events at the Warsaw Zoo.

## **CREDITS**

PRODUCTION: **AUTOGRAF, TVP Polish Public Television S.A.**, Mazovia Institute of Culture, Mazovia Warsaw Film Fund, National Film Archive – Audiovisual Institute, National Centre for Culture, MX35  
written and directed by Łukasz Czajka

director of photography: Kacper Czubak

editor: Jakub Piątek

music by Marcin Masecki

sound by Marcin Lenarczyk

produced by Anna Wereda – Autograf

co-financed by: Polish Film Institute, Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, Office of the Marshal of the Mazowieckie Voivodeship in Warsaw, Capital City of Warsaw

**Country of Production:** Poland

**Running Time:** 70 min.

**Language:** English dubbing

**Year of production:** 2019

## **AWARDS**

### **2020**

#### **Docudays UA International Documentary Human Rights Film Festival**

Nominated, DOCU/WORLD (the international competition of feature and medium-length documentaries which are longer than 30 minutes)

Best Film, Łukasz Czajka

**Gdynia (International Film Festival "Unruly, Unbreakable, Cursed")** – A distinction for "artistic portrayal of the times when saving life was punishable by death"

**Bellaria-Igea Marina (Bellaria Film Festival)** - Bei Doc Award

### **2019**

#### **Guangzhou International Documentary Film Festival (GZDOC)**

Won, Golden Kapok Award

Best Art Doc Award, Łukasz Czajka (director)

**Chicago (Polish Film Festival in America)** – Special Jury Prize to documentary film

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