

## War film shows Warsaw zoo couple who hid Jews

The director of Warsaw zoo and his wife always carried cyanide during World War II. Danger was ever-present but they were ready to take their secret to the grave. The couple hid nearly 300 Jews and resistance fighters on zoo grounds during most of the war, under the noses of the German Nazis occupying Poland.

It sounds like a Hollywood movie, and now it is. But "The Zookeeper's Wife", which opens in Polish cinemas this week before rolling out internationally, is based on actual events. Inside the zookeeper's villa, whose windowless cellar had a secret tunnel leading to the garden, Jan Zabinski and his wife Antonina gave refuge to the mostly Jews smuggled out of the city's ghetto.



**Teresa Zabinska, daughter of Jan Zabinski, attends the screening gala of "The Zookeeper's Wife" in Warsaw on March 7, 2017. — AFP**

"I remember squatting under this concrete shelf in the basement and keeping my hand over my sister's mouth to muffle her cries because she was constantly crying, day and night," said Moshe Tirosh, aged five at the time. "When someone slammed the door upstairs, fear would pass through me, lest they find us," the 80-year-old told AFP in a telephone interview.

The retired businessman and grandfather-of-seven, who has lived in Israel since 1957, still cannot believe what he lived through. "I saw children's dead bodies on the street. Terrible things... I remember wondering why everyone wants to kill us. I couldn't understand it," he said. All but two of the zoo's hidden guests survived the war and Nazi troops stationed on the bombed-out zoo grounds never unearthed the subterfuge.

### Piano warning

"My parents figured that it's always darkest under a lamppost," the zoo couple's daughter Teresa Zabinska said, citing a Polish saying according to which it is best to hide in plain sight. "My father knew that it wouldn't occur to the Germans that so many people could be hiding in a place like this with open windows and no curtains," the 73-year-old told AFP.

Most hid in empty animal enclosures or the villa's basement. Others were able to stay with the family upstairs by taking on fake identities as Antonina's tailor or their son Ryszard's tutor. Between 1940 and

1944, nearly 300 people found refuge, some for just a few hours or days, but others remained months or even years. "Around 30 people would stay here at once," said Olga Zbonikowska, 38, who works for the Panda Foundation that takes care of the villa now. The stakes were high. In occupied Poland, even offering Jews a glass of water was punishable by death.

### 'Remember the feeling'

Whenever a Nazi soldier got too close for comfort, Antonina would warn everyone by playing an operetta on the piano. The hidden guests would escape through the tunnel or hide in a wardrobe upstairs that opened on both sides like a magician's trunk. The couple also hid the Jews from their housekeeper out of fear she could give them away.

"The hardest was explaining away the increase in daily meals" to the housekeeper, Antonina wrote in her 1968 memoirs, saying the family fed the extra mouths by faking ravenous appetites. "I can't believe how much they eat! I've never seen anything like it!" she recalled the housekeeper muttering. Tirosh had suffered two years in the ghetto, marked by hunger, typhus and near deportation to the Treblinka death camp.

To escape Warsaw's Jewish quarter, his family paid off the guards and Tirosh and his sister were thrown over the wall in sacks while their parents climbed over. On arriving at the zoo, Antonina's empathy and reassuring calm told them they were in good hands. "She was extraordinary. I was a small boy who was very afraid of everything. But when I saw her face, I calmed right down. I still remember that feeling," Tirosh said.

### Helping animals and people

Before the family moved on, Antonina tried to make them "look less Jewish" by bleaching their hair lighter. "She locked herself in the bathroom with us and dyed our hair. She rubbed and rubbed and when we came out of the bathroom, Rysiek (nickname for the Zabinskis' son) cried out, 'Mum! What did you do? That's squirrel colour,'" Tirosh said, of the inadvertent reddish colour.

The family became known as The Squirrels. Others also had animal nicknames, including The Starling, The Hamsters and The Pheasants. "Theirs was a house where both animals and people always found help," said Teresa, who was born at the zoo and had a raccoon-like coat from Mexico as a childhood playmate. Aptly, her mother's memoirs-to-be republished this month-were entitled "People and Animals". They describe how Antonina pushed to raise funds to reopen the zoo after the war while Jan was in a Nazi German prisoner-of-war camp, having fought in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising.

American author Diane Ackerman relied heavily on the memoirs when writing her own 2007 nonfiction book "The Zookeeper's Wife", which inspired the movie. Directed by Niki Caro, it stars Golden Globe winner Jessica Chastain. The Zabinskis died in the early 1970s. The villa is now a museum where visitors can make an appointment to see the life-saving secret tunnel and basement. — AFP



**In this image released by Sony Pictures, Jake Gyllenhaal, left, and Rebecca Ferguson appear in a scene from, "Life." — AP photos**

### Film Review

## 'LIFE' IS A MEDIOCRE SCIENCE-FICTION THRILLER



**Ryan Reynolds appears in a scene from, "Life."**

Life is a box of chocolates, a highway and, alas, a mediocre science-fiction thriller. In Daniel Espinosa's "Life," an international space station orbiting the Earth intercepts an automated capsule returning from Mars with samples: rocks, dust and, as it turns out, a tiny monocellular organism that proves the existence of life on another planet. The thing, though, about those monocellular organisms from Mars is that they grow up.

When Dr Hugh Derry (Arioyon Bakare) injects the cell with glucose, it begins rapidly growing bigger, beyond its petri dish. (Yes, "Life" is, above all, a lesson in the dangers of too much sugar.) The crew - including Jake Gyllenhaal's troubled veteran, Ryan Reynolds' cocky engineer, Rebecca Ferguson's microbiologist and Hiroyuki Sanada's new father - celebrate their remarkable discovery and observe its development. "You're going to be a daddy," Reynolds' astronaut tells the proud Derry.

Derry, the biological expert of the bunch, hopes the organism - dubbed "Calvin" - will teach the scientists about the origin, the nature "and maybe even the meaning of life." Such glories, however, aren't in store. The harsh revelation that Calvin brings is that life - violently striving for survival - finds a way.

Unfortunately, "Life," the movie, doesn't. Once the alien lifeform strengthens and gets loose, "Life" surrenders to a tiresome chase away from not just its ravenous creature but from the movies "Life" so obviously takes it cues from. "Life" certainly can't come anywhere near the well-earned horrors of "Alien," nor does it boast anything like the silky splendor of "Gravity."

Espinosa ("Safe House," "Child 44") claustrophobically encloses the drama in a fairly realistic space station that, lacking sufficiently cinematic production design, doesn't allow

for much movement. Unlike Hollywood's recent, more ambitious sojourns into space, "Life" is a grittier, clunkier B-movie monster movie in zero gravity. An extraterrestrial Frankenstein is hunted with implausible dimwittedness by a bickering human crew.

Calvin (sadly there is no Hobbes in sight) grows in size and shape, but he mostly looks like a super-powerful, fearfully smart starfish. As



**Jake Gyllenhaal appears in a scene from "Life."**

he slithers this way and that, he almost resembles the alien cousin of Hank, the equally resourceful octopus of last year's "Finding Dory." Penned by Rheet Reese and Paul Wernick ("Deadpool," "Zombieland"), "Life" doesn't have much of the sarcastic wit the screenwriters have shown before. Instead, it's merely a terse, prickly cheap-thriller. Not until the film's final moments - finally free of the space station - does the movie find its own bite.

"Life," a Columbia Pictures release, is rated R by the Motion Picture Association of America for "language throughout, some sci-fi violence and terror." Running time: 102 minutes. Two stars out of four. — AP