



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

**“Heroes and Role Models:
Jan and Antonina Zabinski”
by Jonah Lieberman Flint
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When I looked up the words hero and role model, here’s what I found. Hero: “A man/woman of distinguished courage or ability, admired for his or her brave deeds and noble qualities”. Role Model: “A person whose behavior, example, or success is or can be emulated by others, especially by younger people”. A hero is someone who has done a courageous deed and you appreciate them for that. You might not think you could ever do what they did. A role model is someone you can look up to and want to be like when you grow up because of what they did in their lives. In my opinion, role models are more important because a role model is someone you look up to and respect. You could imagine yourself possibly doing what they do. I chose Jan and Antonina Zabinski as my role models. They were a Christian married couple living in Warsaw, Poland before, during and after the German occupation, during World War Two. I read about the Zabinskis in a book called The Zookeeper’s Wife by Diane Ackerman.

The Zabinskis appealed to me as role models because of the values they displayed in the amazing work they did to help Jews during the war. Courage, honesty and family were all very important values that led Jan and Antonina to make the decisions they made and take the risks that they took.

Jan and Antonina ran the Warsaw zoo with many exotic animals and they had two children—a son and a daughter. During the Holocaust, hundreds of Jews stayed in their home and passed through to eventual escape. One of their tactics was to switch people’s names with animal names, so that if any conversation were overheard, it would sound like someone was talking to an animal. One example of this is that any time Antonina heard her son call out “Hurry up! Starling! Come here!” it meant that her friend the artist, Magdalena Gross, was entering the house. There were many other “codes.” For example, when someone came to the door who was not welcome or whom Antonina did not know, she would play a certain song on the piano and all of the Jews would know to hide.

In the escape system they devised, Jan and Antonina had very different roles. Jan worked in the Polish resistance. He brought people from the Warsaw ghetto to the house to begin their escape. Their young son also risked his life carrying food to Jews who were in need. Antonina fed people and took care of the household. She stayed at home and supervised the rescue operation. If a soldier came to the house threatening her or threatening to come in to search, Antonina would deal with it. One day, a German soldier came to her and said that a shed had burned down; the soldier said that it was her son’s fault and they were going to kill him. Antonina replied simply and calmly, talking to him as if he were a hungry lion. She was able to convince the soldier to go away and tell others that the fire was an accident and not her son’s fault. Following this incident, Jan said: “We know how cautious wild animals can be, how easily they scare when their instinct tells them to defend themselves. When they sense a stranger crossing their territory, they get aggressive for their own protection. But, in Antonina’s case, it’s like that instinct is absent, leaving her unafraid of either two- or four legged animals. Nor does she convey fear. That combination might persuade people or animals around her not to attack.”

Jan and Antonina embody the value of courage. Just the fact that they remained and survived in Warsaw during the German occupation takes a lot of courage. I think that the compassion they felt for the Jews was one of the motivations for their courage. At that time, giving a thirsty Jew a sip of water was punishable by death. The Zabinskis helped hundreds of Jews escape from the Nazis. In addition, the way they escaped is incredible; at certain points, the Zabinskis had up to fifty people staying in their home. They took drastic measures to help them escape.

In Warsaw, during the occupation, everyone was in danger. The Zabinskis exhibited unusual courage, putting themselves in extreme danger by helping Jews to escape.

What drove the Zabinskis to do this was the savagery and unfairness of the Nazis. The value of justice was important to them and the idea of the German army attacking and killing in cold blood those who had not harmed them was awful. The Zabinskis had many Jewish friends who were in serious danger of being killed or captured. Their affection for and loyalty to their friends motivated them to help innocent people escape from certain death.

Honesty is a complicated value for Jan and Antonina. Because of what they were doing to help people, they had to lie every day, in both their words and their actions. They constantly deceived the Germans and the Polish collaborators. However, by lying, the Zabinskis saved innocent lives. There was one situation where Jan was taking a Jewish man from the Warsaw ghetto to his house. The guard asked who the man was and said that he thought he was a Jew. Jan lied, saying the man was a fellow businessman with whom Jan had business dealings. By lying, Jan saved that man's life; his dishonesty had a higher purpose.

But in spite of all of this lying and dishonesty, Jan and Antonina stayed honest to their beliefs that it wasn't right to persecute and kill Jews, that the Poles had the right to be self-governing, and that the occupation by the Nazis was wrong. In this way, they were both honest and dishonest. They were dishonest by lying to those whose only intention was to hurt others or pass on information that could hurt people. Even though they were dishonest in their dealings with the Nazis, they were able to stay true to their beliefs.

Jan and Antonina both had experiences when they were growing up that shaped them into who they became. Jan was born in Warsaw in 1897 to an affluent family, but by chance, grew up in a poor Jewish section of Warsaw. In the school Jan attended, 80 percent of the students were Jewish. Jan got to know even more Jews during his military service in World War I.

Antonina was born in St. Petersburg to a Polish family. Her mother died of tuberculosis when Antonina was still a little girl, and her aunt raised her. Her father was a railway engineer in Uzbekistan, and when she was about 14, she joined him there. Then he and his Russian wife were murdered. Good people took in Antonina and brought her to Warsaw at the end of the 1920s. Given their personal histories, it makes sense to me that the Zabinskis were open minded toward Jews and very sensitive to injustice and family loss.

However, as we all know, no family is perfect. There were times during the occupation when Jan would be angry and verbally abusive towards Antonina, perhaps because of the stress from his work with the resistance. No matter how well Antonina did her job or concealed someone, Jan would still criticize her. Any missteps could mean death, and Jan must have been constantly reminded of that. However, they were able to get through it, work well as a highly coordinated team and succeed in helping Jews escape.

One important quality of the Zabinskis was that for them, the definition of family was not just their kids and parents. The idea of family extended beyond the walls of the traditional family. It extended to a broader definition of community, with the safety of other families being as important as their own. So a lot of the dangerous work they did was to protect families and to try to keep other families together, even though it meant putting their own family at risk. I think the view that every family is important motivated this couple to protect families and try to keep them together. Because the Zabinskis treated the families in need with such care and respect, more and more people came through their house and the zoo to escape the violence and persecution of the Nazis.

Of the many people who stayed at the Zabinski's house during the Holocaust, only two did not survive. Some of the others decided to return to Warsaw after the war. When the war ended, Jan and Antonina rebuilt the zoo and reopened it, but without all the exotic animals, mainly local animals. Two years later, at the age of fifty-four, Jan retired from zoo keeping, after which he wrote over fifty books. Antonina wrote a few children's books and stayed at home taking care of their kids.

In 1965, the Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem recognized Jan and Antonina Zabinski as Righteous among the Nations. In his testimony explaining his motives, Jan wrote: "My deeds were and are a consequence of a certain psychological composition, a result of progressive-humanistic upbringing, which I received at home as well as in Kreczmar High School. Many times I wished to analyze the causes for dislike for Jews and I could not find any, besides artificially formed ones."

When I reflect on the Zabinskis' actions, there is a part of me that thinks I would have done what they did and another part of me that says that I wouldn't have. I possess some of the qualities of people who rescued Jews but I think that it was a very daring thing to do. I do not know whether I would have had the courage to put so much effort into helping these desperate people. The qualities that most rescuers had were the ability to be decisive, fast-thinking, risk-taking, independent, adventurous, openhearted, rebellious and unusually flexible. Although I only have some of these qualities, I believe that if people I knew really needed my help, I would have done all that I could do to help them.