

CHAPTER 1

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SUMMER, 1935

AT DAWN IN AN OUTLYING DISTRICT OF WARSAW, SUNLIGHT swarmed around the trunks of blooming linden trees and crept up the white walls of a 1930s stucco and glass villa where the zoo director and his wife slept in a bed crafted from white birch, a pale wood used in canoes, tongue depressors, and Windsor chairs. On their left, two tall windows crowned a sill wide enough for sitting, with a small radiator tucked below. Oriental rugs warmed the parquet floor, where strips of wood slanted together as repeating feathers, and a birch armchair squared one corner of the room.

When a breeze lifted the voile curtain enough for grainy light to spill in without casting shadows, barely visible objects began anchoring Antonina to the sensible world. Soon the gibbons would start whooping, and after that a pandemonium rip no one could sleep through, not owl-eyed student or newborn. Certainly not the zookeeper's wife. All the usual domestic chores awaited her each day, and she was clever with food, paintbrush, or needle. But she also had zoo problems of her own to solve, sometimes uncanny ones (such as hyena-cub soothing) that challenged her schooling and native gifts.

Her husband, Jan Żabiński, usually arose earlier, dressed in trousers and a long-sleeved shirt, and slid a large watch over his hairy left wrist before padding downstairs. Tall and slender, with a strong nose, dark eyes, and the muscular shoulders of a laborer, he was built a little like her father, Antoni Erdman, a Polish railroad engineer based in St. Petersburg, who traveled throughout Russia following his trade. Like Jan, Antonina's father had plenty of mental muscle, enough to get him and her mother, Maria, shot as members of the intelligentsia in the early days of the Russian Revolution in 1917, when Antonina was only nine. And like her father, Jan was a kind of engineer, though the connections he fostered were between people and animals, and also between people and their animal nature.

Balding, with a crown of dark brown hair, Jan needed a hat to fight burn in summer and chill in winter, which is why in outdoor photographs he's usually wearing a fedora, giving him an air of sober purpose. Some indoor photographs capture him at his desk or in a radio studio, jaw tight in concentration, looking like a man easily piqued. Even when he was clean-shaven, a five o'clock shadow stippled his face, especially on the philtrum between nose and mouth. A full, neatly edged upper lip displayed the perfect peaks women create with lip liner, a "Cupid's bow" mouth; it was his only feminine feature.

After the death of Antonina's parents, her grandmother sent her to school full-time to study piano at the city's conservatory and also attend school in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, from which she graduated at fifteen. Before the year was out, they moved to Warsaw and Antonina took classes in foreign languages, drawing, and painting. She did a little teaching, passed an archivist's exam, and worked in the labeled past of Warsaw's College of Agriculture, where she met Jan, a zoologist eleven

years her senior, who had studied drawing and painting at the Academy of Fine Arts, and shared her relish both for animals and animalistic art. When the position of zoo director came free in 1929 (the founding director had died after two years), Jan and Antonina leapt at the chance to shape a new zoo and spend their lives among animals. In 1931, they married and moved across the river to Praga, a tough industrial district with its own street slang, on the wrong side of the tracks, but only fifteen minutes by trolley from downtown.

In the past, zoos were privately owned and conferred status. Anyone could stock a curiosity cabinet, but it took means, and a little madness, to collect the largest crocodile, oldest turtle, heaviest rhino, rarest eagle. In the seventeenth century, King Jan III Sobieski kept many exotic animals at court; and rich noblemen sometimes lodged private menageries on their estates as a sign of wealth.

For years, Polish scientists dreamt of a big zoo in the capital to rival any in Europe, especially those in Germany, whose majestic zoos were famous worldwide. Polish children clamored for a zoo, too. Europe enjoyed a heritage of fairy tales alive with talking animals—some almost real, others deliciously bogus—to spark a child's fantasies and gallop grown-ups to the cherished haunts of childhood. It pleased Antonina that her zoo offered an orient of fabled creatures, where book pages sprang alive and people could parley with ferocious animals. Few would ever see wild penguins sledding downhill to sea on their bellies, or tree porcupines in the Canadian Rockies, balled up like giant pinecones, and she believed that meeting them at the zoo widened a visitor's view of nature, personalized it, gave it habits and names. Here lived the *wild*, that fierce beautiful monster, caged and befriended.

Each morning, when zoo dawn arrived, a starling gushed a medley of stolen songs, distant wrens cranked up a few arpeggios, and cuckoos called monotonously like clocks stuck on the hour. Suddenly the gibbons began whooping bugle calls so crazy loud that the wolves and hunting dogs started howling, the hyenas gibbering, the lions roaring, the ravens croaking, the peacocks screeching, the rhino snorting, the foxes yelping, the hippos braying. Next the gibbons shifted into duets, with the males adding soft squealing sounds between their whoops and the females bellowing streams of long notes in their “great call.” The zoo hosted several mated pairs, and gibbon couples yodel formal songs complete with overture, codas, interludes, duets, and solos.

Antonina and Jan had learned to live on seasonal time, not mere chronicity. Like most humans, they did abide by clocks, but their routine was never quite routine, made up as it was of compatible realities, one attuned to animals, the other to humans. When timelines clashed, Jan returned home late, and Antonina woke in the night to help midwife an animal like a giraffe (always tricky because the mother gives birth standing up, the calf falls headfirst, and the mother doesn’t want help anyway). This brought a slated novelty to each day, and though the problems might be taxing, it imprinted her life with small welcome moments of surprise.

A glass door in Antonina’s bedroom opened onto a wide second-story terrace at the back of the house, accessible from each of three bedrooms and a narrow storage room they called the attic. Standing on the terrace, she could peer into the spires of evergreens, and over lilacs planted near six tall living room windows to catch river breezes and waft scent indoors. On warm spring days, the lilacs’ purple cones swung like censers

and a sweet narcotic amber drifted in at intervals, allowing the nose to rest awhile between fragrant reveilles. Perched on that terrace, inhaling air at the level of ginkgo and spruce, one becomes a creature of the canopies. At dawn, a thousand moist prisms ornament the juniper as one glances over the heavily laden limbs of an oak tree, beyond the Pheasant House, down to the zoo's main gate about fifty yards away on Ratuszowa Street. Cross over and you enter Praski Park, as many Warsawians did on warm days, when the linden trees' creamy yellow tassels drugged the air with the numbing scent of honey and the rhumba of bees.

Traditionally, lindens capture the spirit of summer—*lipa* means linden, and *Lipiec* means July. Once sacred to the goddess of love, they became Mary's refuge when Christianity arrived, and at roadside shrines, under lindens, travelers still pray to her for good fortune. In Warsaw, lindens enliven parks and ring cemeteries and markets; rows of tall, leaf-helmeted lindens flank the boulevards. Revered as God's servants, the bees they lure provide mead and honey for the table and beeswax candles for church services, which is why many churches planted linden trees in their courtyards. The bee-church connection became so strong that once, at the turn of the fifteenth century, the villagers of Mazowsze passed a law condemning honey thieves and hive vandals to death.

In Antonina's day, Poles felt less violent but still zealous about bees, and Jan kept a few hives at the far edge of the zoo, clustered like tribal huts. Housewives used the honey to sweeten iced coffee, make *krupnik*, hot vodka with honey, and bake *piernik*, a semisweet honey-spice cake, or *pierniczki*, honey-spice cookies. They drank linden tea to brighten a cold or tame the nerves. In this season, whenever Antonina crossed

the park on her way to the trolley stop, church, or market, she walked through corridors thickly scented by linden flowers and abuzz with half-truths—in local slang, *lipa* also meant white lies.

Across the river, the skyline of Old Town rose from the early-morning mist like sentences written in invisible ink—first just the roofs, whose curved terra-cotta tiles overlapped like pigeon feathers—then a story of sea-green, pink, yellow, red, copper, and beige row houses that lined cobblestone streets leading to Market Square. In the 1930s, an open-air market served the Praga district, too, near the vodka factory on Ząbkowska (Tooth) Street designed to look like a squat castle. But it wasn't as festive as Old Town's, where dozens of vendors sold produce, crafts, and food below yellow and tan awnings, the shopwindows displayed Baltic amber, and for a few groschen a trained parrot would pick your fortune from a small jug of paper scrolls.

Just beyond Old Town lay the large Jewish Quarter, full of mazy streets, women wearing wigs and men sideburn curls, religious dancing, a mix of dialects and aromas, tiny shops, dyed silks, and flat-roofed buildings where iron balconies, painted black or moss green, rose one above the other, like opera boxes filled not with people but with tomato pots and flowers. There one could also find a special kind of *pierogi*, large chewy *kreplach*: fist-sized dumplings filled with seasoned stew meat and onions before being boiled, baked, then fried, the last step glazing and toughening them like bagels.

The heartbeat of eastern European Jewish culture, the Quarter offered Jewish theater and film, newspapers and magazines, artists and publishing houses, political movements, sports and literary clubs. For centuries, Poland had granted asylum to

Jews fleeing persecution in England, France, Germany, and Spain. Some twelfth-century Polish coins even bear Hebrew inscriptions, and one legend has it that Jews found Poland attractive because the country's name sounded like the Hebrew imperative *po lin* ("rest here"). Yet anti-Semitism still percolated in twentieth-century Warsaw, a city of 1.3 million people, a third of whom were Jewish. They mainly settled in the Quarter, but also lived in posher neighborhoods throughout the city, though for the most part they kept their distinctive garb, language, and culture, with some speaking no Polish at all.

On a typical summer morning, Antonina leaned on the wide flat ledge of the terrace wall, where apricot tiles, cold enough to collect dew, dampened the sleeves of her red robe. Not all the bellowing, wailing, braying, and rumbling around her originated outside—some issued from the subterranean bowels of the villa, others from its porch, terrace, or attic. The Żabińskis shared their home with orphaned newborn or sick animals, as well as pets, and the feeding and schooling of lodgers fell to Antonina, whose animal wards clamored to be fed.

Not even the villa's living room was off limits to the animals. With its six tall window panels that could easily be mistaken for landscape paintings, the long, narrow salon blurred the boundaries between inside and out. Across the room, a large wooden credenza displayed books, periodicals, nests, feathers, small skulls, eggs, horns, and other artifacts on its many shelves. A piano stood on an Oriental rug beside a scatter of boxy armchairs with red fabric cushions. In the warmest corner, at the far end of the room, dark brown tiles adorned a fireplace and hearth, and the sun-bleached skull of a bison rested atop the mantelpiece. Armchairs sat beside the windows, where afternoon light washed in.

One journalist who visited the villa to interview Jan was surprised by two cats entering the living room, the first with a bandaged paw and the second a bandaged tail, followed by a parrot wearing a metal neck cone, and then a limping raven with a broken wing. The villa bustled with animals, which Jan explained simply: "It's not enough to do research from a distance. It's by living beside animals that you learn their behavior and psychology." On Jan's daily rounds of the zoo by bicycle, a large elk named Adam swayed close behind, an inseparable companion.

There was something alchemical about living so intimately with the likes of lion kitten, wolf cub, monkey toddler, and eagle chick, as the animal smells, scratchings, and calls mingled with human body and cooking smells, with human chatter and laughter in a mixed family of den-mates. At first a new member of the household slept or fed on its old schedule, but gradually the animals began to live in synchrony as their rhythms drew closer together. Not their breathing, though, and at night the sleepy tempo of breaths and snufflings created a zoological cantata hard to score.

Antonina identified with animals, fascinated by how their senses tested the world. She and Jan soon learned to slow around predators like wild cats, because close-set eyes give them pinpoint depth perception, and they tend to get excited by quick movements a leap or two away. Prey animals like horses and deer enjoy wraparound vision (to spot predators creeping up on them), but panic easily. The lame speckled eagle, tethered in their basement, was essentially a pair of binoculars with wings. The hyena pups would have spotted Antonina coming in total darkness. Other animals could sense her approach, taste her scent, hear the faintest swoosh of her

robe, feel the weight of her footsteps vibrating the floorboards a whisker's worth, even detect the motes of air she pushed aside. She envied their array of ancient, finely tuned senses; a human gifted with those ordinary talents, Westerners would call a sorcerer.

Antonina loved to slip out of her human skin for a while and spy on the world through each animal's eyes, and she often wrote from that outlook, in which she intuited their concerns and know-how, including what they might be seeing, feeling, fearing, sensing, remembering. When she entered their ken, a transmigration of sensibility occurred, and like the lynx kittens she hand-raised, she could peer up at a world of loud dangling beings:

. . . with legs little or large, walking in soft slippers or solid shoes, quiet or loud, with the mild smell of fabric or the strong smell of shoe polish. The soft fabric slippers moved quietly and gently, they didn't hit the furniture and it was safe to be around them . . . calling "Ki-chi, ki-chi," [until] a head with fluffy blond hair would appear and a pair of eyes behind large glass lenses would bend over. . . . It didn't take long to realize that the soft fabric slippers, the blond fluffy head, and the high-pitched voice were all the same object.

Often dabbling in such slippages of self, aligning her senses with theirs, she tended her wards with affectionate curiosity, and something about that attunement put them at ease. Her uncanny ability to calm unruly animals earned her the respect of both the keepers and her husband, who, though he believed science could explain it, found her gift nonetheless strange and mysterious.

Jan, a devout scientist, credited Antonina with the “metaphysical waves” of a nearly shamanistic empathy when it came to animals: “She’s so sensitive, she’s almost able to read their minds. . . . She *becomes* them. . . . She has a precise and very special gift, a way of observing and understanding animals that’s rare, a sixth sense. . . . It’s been this way since she was little.”

In the kitchen each morning, she poured herself a cup of black tea and started sterilizing glass baby bottles and rubber nipples for the household’s youngest. As zoo nurse, she was lucky enough to adopt two baby lynxes from Białowieża, the only primeval forest left in all of Europe, an ecosystem Poles called a *puszcza*, a word evoking ancient woodlands undefiled by human hands.

Straddling what is now the border between Belarus and Poland, Białowieża unites the two at the level of antler and myth, and traditionally served both countries as a famous hunting retreat for kings and tsars (who kept an ornate lodge there), which, by Antonina’s time, fell under the purview of scientists, politicians, and poachers. The largest land animals in Europe, European (or “forest”) bison, sparred in its woods, and their decline helped to kindle Poland’s conservation movement. As a bilingual Pole born in Russia who returned to Poland, she felt at home in that green isthmus linking different regimes, walking in the shade of trees half a millennium old, where the forest closes in, intimate as a tick, one fragile, fully furnished organism with no visible borders. Pristine acres of virgin forest, declared untouchable, create a realm that airplanes overfly by miles lest they scare the animals or taint the foliage. Looking up through the open parachutes of treetops, a visitor might spy a distant plane banking like a small silent bird.

Though outlawed, hunting still existed, leaving motherless young animals, the rarest of which usually arrived at the zoo in a crate marked “live animal.” The zoo served as lifeboat, and during April, May, and June, the birthing season, Antonina expected crotchety offspring, each with its own special diet and customs. The month-old wolf cub would normally be tended by its mother and family members until two years old. The clean, sociable baby badger responded well to long walks and dined on insects and herbs. Striped wild boar piglets did justice to any table scraps. A red deer fawn bottle-fed until midwinter and skidded, splay-legged, on wooden floors.

Her favorites were Tofi and Tufa, the three-week-old lynx kittens, who needed bottle-nursing for six months and weren't really self-reliant for a year or so (and, even then, they liked walks on a leash down Praga's busiest street, while passersby gaped). Because so few wild lynxes remained in Europe, Jan went to Białowieża himself to fetch the kittens, and Antonina offered to raise them inside the house. When his taxi arrived at the main gate one summer evening, a guard ran to help Jan unload a small wooden box and together they carried it to the villa, where Antonina eagerly waited with sterilized glass bottles, rubber nipples, and warm formula. As they lifted off the lid, two tiny speckled fur balls stared up angrily at the human faces, hissed, and began biting and scratching any hand that reached for them.

“Human hands with so many moving fingers scare them,” Antonina advised softly. “And our loud voices, and the sharp light from the lamp.”

The kittens trembled, “half dead with fear,” she wrote in her diary. Gently, she grabbed the scruff of one's neck, loose

and hot, and as she lifted it from the straw, it hung limp and quiet, so she picked up the other one.

“They like it. Their skin remembers their mother’s jaws carrying them from one place to another.”

When she set them down on the floor in the dining room, they skittered around, exploring the slippery new landscape for a few minutes, then hid under a wardrobe as if it were a rock overhang, inching way back into the darkest crevices they could find.

In 1932, abiding by Polish Catholic tradition, Antonina chose a saint’s name for her own newborn son, Ryszard, or Rys for short—the Polish word for lynx. Though not part of the zoo’s “four-legged, fluffy, or winged” brigade, her son joined the household as one more frisky cub that babbled and clung like a monkey, crawled around on all fours like a bear, grew whiter in winter and darker in summer like a wolf. One of her children’s books describes three household toddlers learning to walk at the same time: son, lion, and chimpanzee. Finding all young mammals adorable, from rhino to possum, she reigned as a mammal mother herself and protectress of many others. Not an outlandish image in a city whose age-old symbol was half woman, half animal: a mermaid brandishing a sword. As she said, the zoo quickly became her “green kingdom of animals on the right side of the Vistula River,” a noisy Eden flanked by cityscape and park.