

**Lessons I Have Learned  
from Nina Jacobs, A  
Holocaust Survivor  
By Avery Madison Porter**

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## **Introduction**

Some people create a "before" and an "after" in your life. In my life, there is a "before Nina" and an "after Nina". It takes a very special kind of person to create a "before" and "after" version of yourself, and Nina Jacobs is just one of those people. Nina is a remarkable woman. She is one of the biggest blessings in my life. I would be an entirely different person if I did not have the honor of listening to her story. She has radically changed me in ways I struggle to put into words. However, because I am a writer, I must try to put it into words. Every Friday, I looked forward to picking up the phone and chatting with Nina for at least an hour. Truthfully, it was the highlight of my week. From love to politics to education, we covered so many topics over our weekly phone calls. By listening to Nina's life story, I learned so many lessons that echo in my own life. In big and small ways, Nina has altered the course of my life through her lessons. Today, I want to share with you Nina's story alongside all the lessons I have learned from Nina Jacobs.

## The Importance of Learning About the Holocaust

*“The Nazis invaded Poland in the summer of 1939. The Jewish population in Poland at that time was 3.3 million, so only one in ten Polish Jews survived. 1.9 million children under the age of fifteen were murdered. The Nazis began to force Jews into walled ghettos, including my mother, my father, my grandmother, my uncle, and my aunt. My mother and father were newlyweds when they entered the ghetto. One day, the Nazis rounded up all the men in the ghetto. My father was one of those men, and he was shot in a pit with thousands of others. You could hear the men praying. All you heard that day was the sound of gunfire.” birth to me on April 5, 1942. My mother hid me for 17 months in a crawl space.”*

Before I met Nina, I had only ever learned about the Holocaust in history classes. Because of this, the Holocaust has always seemed so distant to me. It was something in the past that I did not have access to. My family does not have a direct link to the Holocaust because we are not Jewish. Nina was the first Holocaust survivor I had ever talked to. During our very first meeting, she explained to me the statistics of the Holocaust. It is difficult to wrap your brain around the number of people who were murdered during the Holocaust. We can forget that these people are more than numbers. **Nina made history tangible.** She connected these statistics to her story so beautifully that my heart ached and my eyes watered. Nina reminded me that every single Jewish person killed by the Nazis had a life that was ripped away from them. Her story reminds me of the importance of learning about the Holocaust from survivors. This is especially important if you are not Jewish, like me. We must dedicate ourselves to learning. **It is not enough anymore to just listen to Holocaust survivors' stories, but to learn from them.**

## The Importance of Respecting Your Elders

*"Shortly after my father was killed, my mother found out that she was pregnant. At that time, any pregnant Jewish woman in the ghettos was killed. So, my mother approached my grandmother and told her that she needed an abortion. My grandmother said no. Back in those days, there was a pecking order, so when the matriarch said something, you did not question it. The older members set the rules and standards for the rest of the family, and respected those rules and standards. It is those ties that keep a family together. So, my mother hid her pregnancy and gave birth to me on April 5, 1942. My mother hid me for 17 months in a crawl space."*

Hearing Nina's story, I was struck by her emphasis on respect, especially for the older generations. Respect is vital to all relationships. I would consider it the backbone of any good relationship. Without respect, there can be no relationship. Nina and I both share this belief. We bonded over the respect and love we have for our grandmothers. Throughout this project, I aimed to bring this same level of respect when talking with Nina. I strove to respect Nina's time, life story, and wishes about this project. **I believe that this respect is what has aided in the creation of this beautiful and authentic relationship with Nina.** I am also so privileged that Nina respected me throughout this experience as well. Nina was insistent that our phone calls were not interviews but conversations. She was always so excited to not just share her life story but also learn about my life story. As we got to know each other more, my respect for Nina grew. **Without this foundation of trust, my relationship with Nina, as well as this book, would look completely different.** It was only through respect that I could learn all of these important lessons from Nina and her story.

## The Importance of Courage

*"My uncle had a leather factory. He trusted three of the employees, and he asked them if they would help him and his family if they needed it. They said yes, but they did not know what kind of help they would need to give. When there were rumors that the Nazis were going to 'take' the rest of the children in the ghetto (which means that they were going to murder them), he went to each of the employees and asked them if they would take a child, and one family said that they would. My uncle snuck me out of the ghetto so I could have a chance of survival."*

Sometimes it takes just one act of courage to change a life, and you never know when it will come knocking at your door. **Nina's story could not be told without one act of courage because it saved Nina's life.** I see this courage echoed in Nina. I imagine that it is not easy to tell your survival story over and over again. However, Nina has the courage to do just that. She dares to tell her story to the next generation in order to create real and lasting change in the world. She is also ardent about combating and eliminating antisemitism through her speaking work and does not let the fear of speaking out stop her from boldly sharing her important story. **Nina is one of the most courageous people I know, and I strive to model her courage every single day.** She has taught me so much about having the courage to stand up for what is right and not backing down when fear threatens to overcome you. Nina has empowered me to utilize my own voice and to do so loudly and passionately. Through her kindness, joy, and zest for life, Nina has also given me the courage to write her story. I think that no one embodies courage like Nina.

## The Importance of Perseverance

*"One of the men in the family was named Yanek, and he was my father figure. When I first came to his family, they were scared that the Nazis would find me, so they dug me a hole in the ground, like a grave, and put me in it for two weeks. I did not understand what was happening, so I cried and cried. Yanek was worried that I would not survive, but I did. After two weeks, I was integrated into the family. They did not think that any Jews would survive, so they had me baptized in the Catholic Church and named Yayanina, after Yanek. I started a new life then. Then, after the Holocaust, my mother survived and asked Yanek for me when I was 5 years old. He allowed me to return to my mother but asked that she not change my name. My mother allowed me to hold onto that part of Yanek."*

I cannot imagine how Nina must have felt when she had to leave behind the only life she had ever known and start a completely new life inside a dirt hole. **Nina describes the hole that she lived in for two weeks as a "grave", which I think is an apt metaphor for this part of her story.** The Nazis murdered her old life, and she had to enter into a family, a culture, and a religion that was not her own. She had to bury her old life in fear of being found by the Nazis. **However, with this death, there is also a rebirth.** Nina survived this burial because she was strong enough to persevere through it. It takes someone truly miraculous to persevere through hardship, death, and destruction like Nina. I think that we all should strive to have Nina's strength. She has overcome so much in her life and has created a beautiful life for herself. I know that I am inspired by her perseverance every day, and I hope that everyone else who reads her story is inspired as well.

## **The Importance of Having National Pride**

*"When I moved to the United States in March 1949, it was unlike any other feeling in my life. I think that it is hard for natives to understand how amazing the United States is. As an immigrant, I am so proud of being American. This country gave me new opportunities. It pains me to see this younger generation turning their backs on their home country and not having pride in where they come from. I believe that everyone should be thankful that they live in the United States."*

**Nina's story does not end with the Holocaust.** She had and continues to have a beautiful and full life in the United States. During our phone calls, we always end up chatting about United States politics. We both find it important to keep up with current political events, especially after October 7th. Something that Nina constantly reiterated during our conversations was that there are things that she disagrees with in the government, but that does not stop her from being a proud American. I think that there is so much wisdom in those words. **The political changes we want to make in the United States should come from a shared love of our country.** Our country does not have to be perfect in order to be loved. Positive change can only be accomplished if it comes from a place of love. Nina's story about immigrating to the United States has reignited my own love for the United States. I think that it can be difficult to see how wonderful the United States is if you have lived here your entire life. This is why it was so special to be able to see my home through Nina's eyes. As an immigrant, Nina has an important and unique point of view that I was missing. She reopened my eyes to everything good and beautiful in my home country.

## The Importance of Writing Letters

*" I have snapshots of memories from my childhood with Yanek. The reason I have all this information is that when I was 14 years old, Yanek began writing letters to me. This was 9 years after seeing him last. My mother had to help me write the letters because I did not read or write Polish. He was the one who filled in the gaps of my childhood and my story. I treasure those letters because they were an outpouring of love."*

Since I was in middle school, I have been obsessed with writing letters to my friends and family. I never turn down an opportunity to hand-write a note to someone I love. I wrote letters to friends when they would spend the entire summer at camp. I always include a birthday card with a personalized message any time I give someone a gift. I sent postcards to almost all of my loved ones while I was studying abroad in London. Writing letters is a dying art. There are very few people, especially young people, who write letters today. Nina's story highlights the power of writing letters to others. There is also something deeply personal about letters because letters represent a desire for connection that goes beyond just a quick text message. Letters are a way to communicate memories and keep history alive. Nina's life would look dramatically different if she did not have these letters from Yanek. **Yanek's letters are her direct connection to her past and her life story.** Nina's letters have inspired me to continue writing letters because you never know if a single letter has the possibility of changing your life.

## **The Importance of Friends and Family**

*"Growing up, I had a house but not a home. So, I strove to give my three sons (Ira, Craig, and Ross) the childhood I never had. I am also so thankful for my five grandchildren - Dana, Avi, Jett, Cole, and Jack - and I love getting to see them grow up. Family is everything to me, and I am so thankful for their presence. Also, I have had the same best friends for over 50 years. We still get together every now and again. They are my rocks. I cannot imagine my life without my friends and family."*

Throughout these past four months, I have gotten to know Nina's loved ones through her memories and stories. It is so clear that she lives and breathes for her family and friends. She is extremely active in her children's and grandchildren's lives. She still gets together with her best friends whenever they have the time. Nina does not let distance or time zones or busy schedules get in the way of connecting with her loved ones. It is important to have close connections with your loved ones because they lift you up. **Nina credits her wonderful friends and family with her success and happiness.** During our phone calls, we share stories about our loved ones and always end up laughing about how similar our friends and family are. I think that this is why Nina feels like a long-time friend. From our very first conversation, I knew that Nina would feel like another grandmother to me. Even though this book marks the end of this fellowship, I know that our bond will continue to strengthen, and I am looking forward to our relationship continuing to grow.

## **The Importance of Being Happy That You Are Getting Old**

*"I want to make it to 94 years old. Ask me why specifically 94 years old... Because, four years ago, I bought a recliner chair, and it has a fifteen-year warranty. I want to make it to 94 years old because that is how old I will be when the warranty ends. I say that there is no way that this chair is going to outlive me!"*

This is my favorite story of Nina's! One of the highlights of this experience has been Nina's wit and humor. She stated this during our very first meeting in February 2025, and it has stuck with me since then. While it is a very funny statement, there is a deeper truth revealed behind her words. I know so many people who are afraid of aging or of getting older, even college students who are anticipating graduation soon. It has become the norm to fear becoming older, and I see countless people attempting to slow down the clock in any way possible. However, millions of Jews lost their lives too soon in the Holocaust, including young children. The next day was not promised to anyone. Death could be right around the corner. When Nina was younger, there was no guarantee that she would survive. There were countless moments when the adults in her life thought that Nina would not live to see another day. So, now, Nina views every day as a gift, and she is excited to get older. **Nina embraces aging with a smile on her face, even with a tumor in her ear.** She reminds me that every day is a blessing and that we cannot waste it. Instead of trying to stop aging, we should celebrate every birthday and every year with joy, laughter, and love. Nina taught me to find humor and joy in getting older. We are all going to get older, so we might as well find something to laugh at while we age!

## The Importance of Storytelling

*"Those kinds of experiences leave a void that can never be filled. I relive the Holocaust every single time I tell my story again. However, I will never stop sharing my experiences because I will not be silent. I am so happy that you, Avery, want to hear my life story because we need young people to be invested in preserving our history, even those who are not Jewish. People must hear my story from me because they cannot ignore it."*

I made it very clear to Nina when we first met that I was not Jewish. I worried that it would be something that would divide us. Instead, it was something that bonded us closer together. Nina was so excited that I was so invested in hearing her story and creating "our little project". She gave me the gift of her story, and for that, I will always be grateful. For me, this project is a call to young adults, especially those who are not Jewish, to become genuinely invested in the Holocaust survivors' stories. **Storytelling will change the world, and it is our duty and obligation to keep these stories alive, no matter our background.** Everyone has a role to play in the preservation of Holocaust stories. Nina's openness has allowed me to be a part of this wonderful tradition of storytelling. It is a true privilege to be a part of Nina's life, contribute to her legacy, and keep her story alive. The past has a tremendous impact on the present, but we cannot learn from the past if we do not have access to it through stories. This is why storytelling is so important. It does not let the horrors of the past be forgotten or lost in history. Storytelling keeps the past alive; it preserves the stories of individuals like Nina. **Hearing Nina's story is one of the greatest honors of my life because I have a direct role in preserving her extraordinary story for future generations.**

## The Importance of Speaking Out Against Antisemitism

*"During the Holocaust, the Nazis could not have done all this death and destruction if they did not have support. There were Nazis collaborators in every single country that Hitler invaded because so many people were antisemitic. At its core, antisemitism is hatred of Jews. October 7th brought me to my knees, literally. I lost my voice. It brings me back to World War II. It is blind hatred of Jews. For me, it is so hard to see this pain decades later. I was unable to speak for weeks after October 7th. My heart hurt. It feels like a full circle. I just wish that people could realize how similar we all actually are."*

**When I was asking Nina about the topics she wanted to be included in "our little project" (which is what she has nicknamed this book), this section on antisemitism was the only thing she asked for.** So, I will try my hardest to do this section justice for her. In every single conversation I had with her, we always ended up talking about antisemitism because Nina is extremely passionate about fighting against antisemitism. It was extremely difficult to hear Nina's stories of antisemitism, especially her experience of hearing about what happened in Israel on October 7th. I could hear the pain and sadness in her voice as she talked about all the people murdered. It is clear that Nina has a deep love for her people and feels their pain like it is her own. The hardest part was hearing about the parallels Nina drew between the Holocaust and October 7th. During this time, it can be easy to fall into despair and not take any action. However, Nina reminds me that I need to speak out against antisemitism. Because of Nina, I feel more passionate and prepared to take action against antisemitism. **Everyone has the power to combat antisemitism, and Nina has inspired me to use my voice to fight alongside my Jewish friends.** I hope that by reading this book, you are also inspired to fight against antisemitism with Nina and me. We cannot be collaborators or bystanders; we must be active fighters.