

A close-up, high-angle photograph of an elderly woman's face. Her mouth is open, showing her teeth. Her eyes are looking upwards and to the right. The skin is wrinkled and aged. The background is a solid dark blue.

THE NEW YORKER
DOCUMENTARY

Nina & Irena

Breaking
Eighty Years
of Silence

A SECOND LOOK

*A companion resource to The New Yorker's film "Nina & Irena,"
for conversations at home and in the classroom*

THE STORY

A grandmother reveals to her grandson, on the eve of her ninetieth birthday, the painful story of her sister's disappearance during the Holocaust.



NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

For my début feature, “White Noise,” I spent four years embedded in the alt-right, never revealing my identity as a Jewish American. Now, for the first time, I have redirected the camera toward my own family. My grandmother lost twenty-five members of her extended family in the Holocaust, including her sister, Irena. Why hasn’t she ever talked about what happened?

— Daniel Lombroso

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why are some stories left untold in a family?
- What is gained, and what is lost, when families stay silent about past traumas?
- What does Nina’s story teach us about the Holocaust, survival, and how this history is passed down across generations?
- How does Nina’s story help us to understand the human condition?

“Nina & Irena” invites us to explore these questions and gain a new perspective on the Holocaust. [Recent surveys](#) conducted by the Claims Conference reveal a decline in knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust among Americans. Since the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, in 2017, and the violent insurrection of January 6, 2021, antisemitic slogans have echoed across the United States. Engaging with stories such as “Nina & Irena” can help us to preserve an essential piece of history and prevent the spread of hate.

Nina is a grandmother of six and a great-grandmother of five. We can contemplate her story—and Daniel’s choices in portraying it on film—as a more universal narrative about the human condition and rebuilding a life, even after a terrible loss. Whether you find yourself watching “Nina & Irena” with family, at school, or in another setting, this resource is a chance to take a second look at, and find inspiration in, someone else’s story.



CONTEXT

Noteworthy references explained for clarity and understanding

ARYAN PAPERS

A certificate required in Nazi Germany to prove one's "racial purity." In the nineteenth century, some scientists had promoted the idea of a mythical, superior race called the "Aryan race," a pseudoscientific idea later embraced by the Nazis. Nina shares how her family survived the early years of the Nazi occupation of Poland by obtaining so-called Aryan papers. [Read more about the term "Aryan" in Nazi Germany.](#)

CONCENTRATION CAMP

Nina refers to her father surviving the Holocaust by escaping from a concentration camp, where Jews and other groups targeted by the Nazis were brought together for imprisonment, forced labor, and extermination. [Read more about Nazi concentration camps.](#)

GESTAPO

The secret police force in Nazi Germany and occupied Europe. Nina recalls that, after the family obtained fake papers asserting that they were Catholic, her father was targeted by informers who threatened to reveal the family's true identity to the Gestapo. Nina says, "We started getting blackmailers coming at night. They said, 'If you don't have anything [to pay for our silence], we're going to send the Gestapo.' And, sure enough, they sent the Gestapo, and they took my father away." [Learn more about the role of the Gestapo.](#)

KIELCE, POLAND

Nina's birthplace and childhood home, situated between the larger cities of Warsaw and Krakow. In 1946, the year after Germany was defeated, Polish soldiers, law enforcement, and civilians massacred at least forty-two Jewish survivors of the Holocaust in Kielce. It was one of the largest acts of antisemitic violence in Poland after the war. [Read more about Kielce.](#)

GHETTO

An area of a city, often enclosed, to which Jews were forced to relocate and where they remained separated from the general population. [Read about Jewish life in ghettos.](#)

[Read more about Poland under Nazi occupation and trace the history of the occupation using this visual chronology.](#)



(Source: [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#))

FOR CONVERSATION & THE CLASSROOM

THEMES AND THROUGH LINES

MEMORY

“I never thought, She’s never coming back. To me, she has disappeared, but she’ll come back. Many times, after the war, if I would see somebody that looked like her, I would follow them, thinking, Maybe it’s her, you know? But, after a while, you know, you stop. I feel the way I feel, but that’s nobody’s business how I feel, and I don’t analyze it. It’s part of me.”

— Nina

SILENCE

“I didn’t talk about that time of my life. First of all, nobody was interested. You didn’t talk about it. Two, I felt that if I start telling my story the way it really happened, it was too depressing or too horrifying for the kids when they were small. So I felt, O.K., sometime later, and later never came.”

— Nina

“We didn’t really talk about the Holocaust. I guess I knew, of course, in the back of my mind, that [Nina] came here after the war. I knew it all along, but I didn’t really think about it. On my mother’s side, we didn’t have anybody to visit. We visited my grandparents in Brooklyn, but there were no aunts and uncles on her side. There was nobody else, really. We didn’t ask many questions when we were growing up. It was just not talked about.”

— Linda Lombroso, daughter of Nina

CONTINUITY AND REMEMBRANCE

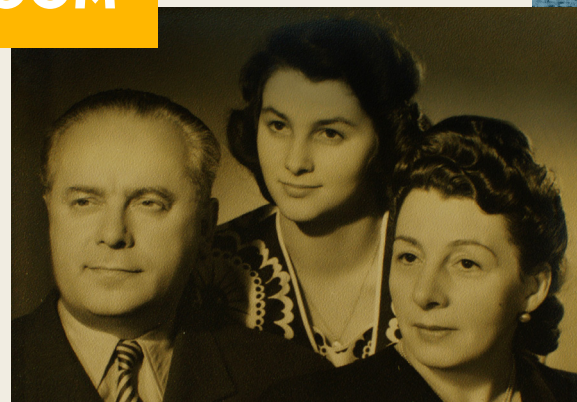
“I don’t have kids yet, and my brother doesn’t either, but one day we will, and I want them to know about you and to know your story. How do you want them and my grandkids to remember you?”

— Daniel Lombroso

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

“People are inhuman, and, if there is any God, I don’t understand that he would let [the Holocaust] happen. . . . We are all born little adorable children. What happens? What happens? What happens to people, that they can become worse than animals? Animals kill because they’re hungry. What people do to people, that’s beyond me.”

— Nina



QUESTIONS

Prompts for post-viewing conversations

- How would you describe Nina?
- What motivated Daniel to film his grandmother’s story?
- What did you learn about this period in history?
- Are there gaps in the story—things that you would like to know more about?
- Which scene in “Nina & Irena” was most memorable? Why?
- If Nina were in the room, what would you ask her? What would you ask Daniel?
- When Nina was asked why she never spoke about the Holocaust, she said, “Later never came.” What do you believe keeps people from speaking about their past?
- What does this film reveal about human behavior or the human condition?
- Take a moment to reflect on the film’s title. How do you interpret it?
- What lessons do you take away from Nina’s story?

FOR STUDENTS

A LETTER FROM NINA

The Reason for Breaking My Silence Now.

I realized that I'll be gone any time soon, and with me, my untold story.

The world is full of violence and hatred.

But why? Where is love, compassion, and civility?

Even within political parties, religious sects, families, and neighbors.

So I thought about my early years (1939–1945) and how we needed those good deeds and feelings. Nobody cared. So sad—that the war didn't have any effect.

So I'm appealing to the young people in the world to change the existing conditions.

Make it a better, more inclusive, harmonious society. Amen.

Nina Gottlieb

April 2023



FOR EDUCATORS

NINA'S BIRTHPLACE: A CASE STUDY OF ONE POLISH TOWN

LESSON OVERVIEW

During the Nazi occupation, Nina was close in age to many of the students watching her story today. Focussing student learning on the Polish city of Kielce, Nina's place of birth, helps students to understand the impact of the Holocaust through one place and one woman's story.

In this lesson, students will research Kielce using the following materials to create a town profile and gain a deeper understanding of Nina's early years.

Nina's story also presents an opportunity to strengthen research, critical-thinking, and media-literacy skills at a time when misinformation is prevalent. Students will practice analyzing source materials from credible institutions and distilling key information to share with their peers. This exercise helps students learn how to use primary and secondary source materials from museums, publications, and other organizations in order to perform historical research.

Educator Note: "[The Challenge That's Bigger Than Fake News](#)," published by the American Federation of Teachers, is a helpful overview to read in preparation for this lesson.



BACKGROUND

As a class, read this overview of [Kielce, Poland](#), hosted on the [Yad Vashem](#) Web Site.



STEP ONE: LEARN ABOUT PREWAR JEWISH LIFE

- Explore the [Museum of the History of Polish Jews](#), situated in Warsaw, Poland.
- Take the lesson "[Exploring Pre-World War II Jewish Life](#)," prepared by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.



STEP TWO: STUDY KIELCE DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

- Read about [Kielce, Poland](#), from the YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe.
- Listen to survivor testimonies about life in Kielce and the Kielce ghetto during the Nazi occupation.
 - [Thomas Buergethal](#)
 - [Isadora Helfing](#)



STEP THREE: LEARN ABOUT POSTWAR KIELCE

The Kielce [pogrom](#) occurred in 1946, a year after the end of the Second World War. The massacre demonstrated the dangers that Polish Jews faced in Europe even after the war.

- Learn more about the Kielce pogrom [here](#).
- Read: "[Kielce: The Post-Holocaust Pogrom That Poland Is Still Fighting Over](#)," *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 8, 2018.



STEP FOUR: PRESENTATION

Students will write and upload their Kielce profiles to a shared classroom portfolio or provide printed copies to share for classroom presentations.



STEP FIVE: EVALUATION

Students will compare profiles and discuss in small groups or as a class how and why different interpretations of the same materials can emerge.



“Nina & Irena” is part of [the New Yorker Documentary series](#), which showcases short films offering uncommon perspectives on global issues. The series is released by [The New Yorker](#), a multi-platform publication known for its in-depth reporting, political and cultural commentary, fiction, poetry, and humor.