



A final burst of colour before darkness descends

In 1938, while on holiday in Nasielsk, near Warsaw, David Kurtz shot a three-minute piece of home-movie footage showing the town's Jewish residents. The people he filmed were Nasielsk's Jews, who would soon be sent to their deaths by the Nazis. **Naomi Gryn** speaks to Bianca Stigter, whose new film explores this extraordinary snapshot of a lost generation

Bianca Stigter's documentary, *Three Minutes: A Lengthening* pulls apart a reel of 16mm film, shot in 1938 in the Jewish quarter of Nasielsk, near Warsaw, and interrogates every frame – sometimes the celluloid itself – to shed light on the life of the town's Jewish community on the eve of its destruction.

Unconstrained by traditional documentary techniques, Stigter's film is poetic and compelling. It grew out of a casual scroll on Facebook. "I'm a historian by trade," she explains. "My interests are art and World War II. I was a film critic for a long time. So Facebook's algorithm showed me this post called *Three Minutes in Poland*, and I was intrigued. You have American tourists that do Europe in three days, but three minutes in a country seemed a bit short."

She clicked on the post. It was about Glenn Kurtz's remarkable book, *Three Minutes in Poland: Discovering a Lost World in a 1938 Family Film* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2014). The book focused on the can of 16mm film that Kurtz had found in a closet in his parents' home in Florida. The film had been shot by his grandfather, David Kurtz, during a vacation to Europe in 1938 and included a three-minute section of David's visit to his home village of Nasielsk. According to the Facebook post,

"You see kids being happy in the streets. People making silly faces and telling funny stories"

the film could be seen on the website of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Intrigued, Stigter searched for it there. "I was immediately taken by it, largely because it's in colour which is rare for that time. We tend to match that part of history in black and white, as if it happened in black and white, but here it was in glorious colour. You see all these children and you have the feeling that they're looking you in the eye. At the same time, you feel this unbearable tension because we know what they don't know, so there are all kinds of conflicting emotions happening while you're watching. You want to warn them: 'Get out, go away,' but you can't, because they're locked into the film."

When the clip ended, Stigter wanted to find out more about the people she'd seen. Shortly afterwards, the Rotterdam Film Festival invited her to make a video essay. "I thought, 'Hey, this is my chance'." She contacted Kurtz and the short film they made together was shown at the festival in 2015. "After that, I still had the feeling that we could do more with the material. I looked for a producer and here we are. A long journey."

Three Minutes: A Lengthening is produced by Family Affair Films, and it has been itself something of a family affair, with Stigter's husband, distinguished video

artist and film director Steve McQueen, as co-producer. This is not the first time they have collaborated: Stigter has been an associate producer on some of McQueen's films, including *12 Years A Slave*, and he is now making a documentary based on his wife's 2019 book, *Atlas of an Occupied City, Amsterdam 1940-1945*.

As far as she knows, there were no Jews amongst her own ancestors, but growing up in Amsterdam, the Holocaust is always present. "My son and daughter both went to a school that had been a Jewish school before the war and it has adopted a monument to Jewish resistance. My daughter went to high school in a building that had been the headquarters of the Gestapo. The place she always put her bike had been the spot where torture had taken place. In Amsterdam, when you have an eye for it, the Holocaust is never far away."

The film has a rare integrity, with Stigter bringing her appreciation of history and film to the work as she explores the simple joy of everyday things. "You see kids being happy in the streets. People making silly faces and telling funny stories. This kind of footage gives you an entry to the past. Film can do that like no other medium." Above all, she says the piece is about the raw power of film and recording.

Clockwise from top left: Shots from the original footage of Nasielsk, taken by David Kurtz in 1938; Bianca Stigter, the director of *Three Minutes: A Lengthening*

Central to its capacity to bridge then and now is an interview with Maurice Chandler, one of the town's residents who appears in the film and was recognised amongst the other children of Nasielsk by his granddaughter when she stumbled across Kurtz's home movie. Chandler, who survived the war on false papers, recalls the mother-of-pearl and bakelite buttons produced in Nasielsk's button factory, and how the headgear worn by children demarcates one group from another, socio-economically and religiously, in much the same way that brands of trainers or logos on a T-shirt might signify different tribes for young people today.

Stigter expanded the film to 70 minutes, adding more layers and anecdotes, looking at the material from different perspectives and pulling the whole piece together with an elegant, respectful narration delivered by Helena Bonham Carter.

The filmmaker also tried to find lip readers who could read Yiddish as it was spoken in villages near Warsaw in the

1930s, but the images were too blurred and the fragments too short. "I thought, if we can't know exactly what they said, we know some of the things they [might have] said." So she created a possible conversation to fit the context and recorded it in Yiddish, Polish and English.

Another Nasielsk native, Leslie Glodek, who moved to England after the war, recalled how there had been dancing in a restaurant on Saturday evenings and remembered hearing Bert Ambrose's orchestra on the BBC. Stigter looked up the *Radio Times* to see what songs they might have heard and put a song called *Chasing Shadows* together with footage of the restaurant. "You can recreate from different sources and put them together, at the same time, being aware that this is not 100 percent accurate, but you get a little bit closer [to what life might have been like]."

Stigter's film doesn't shy from the horrors of that day in 1939, just one year after David Kurtz's visit, when Nasielsk's 3,000 Jews – almost half the pre-war population of the town – were driven, with whips, from their homes and deported to ghettos. Most were later murdered in Treblinka, with only about eighty surviving the war. Stigter conveys these events sensitively, rather than resorting to the grim images of mass extermination to which we have become almost numb. The section on the deportation takes the form of a slow zoom into a still frame of the town square, coming to rest on a stretch of cobbled stones. Over this shot, an actor reads out the testimony on the deportation of Nasielsk's Jews that was hidden in milk cans by the historian Emanuel Ringelblum, and buried along with the rest of his archive beneath the Warsaw ghetto.

When she first visited Nasielsk, there was no sign of Jewish life. "It was just gone.

There was no monument, nothing." But in May 2022, Stigter and Kurtz attended a screening of *Three Minutes: A Lengthening* in Nasielsk, at a cinema which had been in operation in 1938. Stigter was pleased to see that in the town's Jewish cemetery a memorial gate had been erected using old windows from the town's synagogue, and a mural commemorating the community had been painted on the side of the former button factory.

Although the gate was vandalised in September 2022, just four months after its dedication, Stigter feels that progress has been made. "The Jewish past is now visible again in Nasielsk. School children are learning about the Jewish history of their town. It's not so much because of the film, but because of Glenn and the work of the [town's] descendants."

But the film gives a focus. "Three Minutes: A Lengthening begins with David Kurtz's home movie, set to the sound of an old film projector, and the footage is repeated at the end of Stigter's documentary. "[At that point] you watch it in a different way because you recognise the people. You feel a rapport with them, you have a totally different relationship with those people. Yes, it's a story of misery and violence, but it's also a story of joy, with a bit more emphasis on the lives than the loss." The film is a way of making the annihilation of Europe's Jews and their culture feel less abstract. "And that," says Stigter, "is very powerful." ■

Three Minutes: A Lengthening can be seen at homecinema.curzon.com/film/three-minutes-a-lengthening. Check the Curzon cinema's home page for screening details. **Naomi Gryn** is a writer and documentary filmmaker, currently acting as the historic consultant on the television adaptation of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*. naomigryn.com.



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