

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

Reading Group Gold

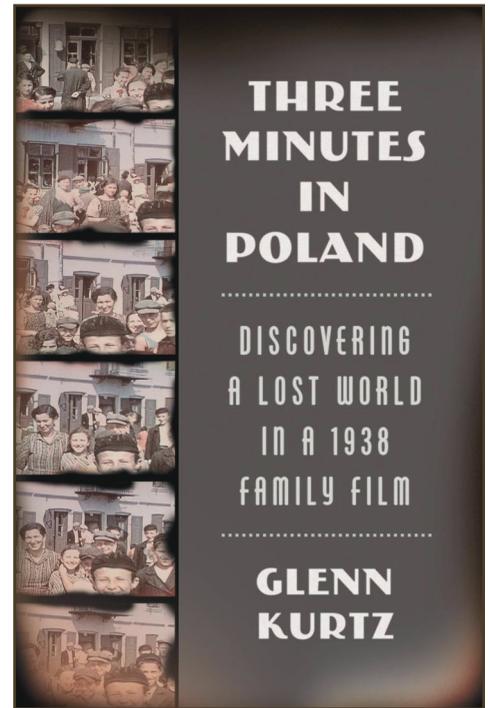
Three Minutes in Poland

Discovering a Lost

World in a 1938

Family Film

by **Glenn Kurtz**



ISBN: 978-0-374-27677-5 / 432 pages

In 2009, Glenn Kurtz found a home movie in his parents' closet. The film had been made by his grandfather, David Kurtz, during a 1938 vacation—a tour of Europe one year before the outbreak of World War II. The scenes include three minutes of footage taken in the Polish town of Nasielsk, where David was born. Children crowd the street, vying for the camera's attention. Vibrant villagers mingle before storefronts, bathed in August sunlight. More than seventy years later, through the brutal twists of history, these few minutes of home-movie footage would become a memorial to an entire community—an entire culture—that was annihilated in the Holocaust. *Three Minutes in Poland* traces Glenn Kurtz's remarkable journey to identify the people in his grandfather's haunting images. Ultimately, Kurtz locates seven living survivors from this lost town, including an eighty-six-year-old man who appears in the film as a thirteen-year-old boy. Their surprisingly intertwined stories create a riveting exploration of memory, loss, and improbable survival.

We hope that the following topics will enrich your reading group's discussion of this poignant tribute to a lost world.

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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The archivist Leslie Swift told Glenn Kurtz that his grandfather's footage is particularly rare because it offers a pre-Holocaust glimpse of Jewish life in a small town, in color; black-and-white Nazi propaganda films and home movies of city life are more common. How did this rare glimpse change your perception of history? What do the lost families of Nasielsk teach us about the past, and the present?
2. The Kurtz film can be retrieved from several online sources, including the author's website (<http://glennkurtz.com/cgi-bin/iowa/three-minutes-in-poland/index.html>). Your reading group may want to watch the film together. If you have already seen it, which visual details were you drawn to? How were you affected by watching a moving picture, compared to looking at the photographs in the book? What details stood out for you? How would you go about trying to discover the identities of these people?
3. What spurred Glenn's intensive research on the Nasielsk footage? Why didn't his father and grandfather take pains to preserve it, as Glenn did? What is different about the way the third generation—the grandchildren—can perceive the Shoah?
4. Although David Kurtz referred to life in Nasielsk as "primitive," what cultural riches did the village experience? Would you have been happy living in a community like theirs, without modern conveniences? What motivated the immigrant David Szmerlak to leave America after twenty-five years, returning to his homeland to build a yeshiva?
5. We read that Glenn's grandmother, Liza, felt a special connection to the people of Berezne when she returned to her hometown. What portrait of her emerged as you learned about her life? For Liza and David, what did it mean to be an American? How do you think Glenn's perception of his grandparents changed over the course of the book?
6. Glenn's interviews reveal the many social divisions within Nasielsk's Jewish quarter during the 1930s, based on wealth, education level, religious orthodoxy, and line of work. Where would you have ranked in this society? What united the town despite its divisions?
7. As you read Morry Chandler's harrowing stories of life on the run, in hiding or in disguise, what did you discover about the tactics used to obliterate Jewish communities in Europe—and the tactics used to try to undermine those efforts?
8. In Glenn's interviews with the other survivors (Susan Weiss, Leslie Glodek, Mikhail Koprak, Andrzej Lubieniecki, Faiga Tick, and Grace Pahl), what common threads emerged? What unique aspects of their lives were especially compelling to you? Do you recognize aspects of your own childhood? How much would you recall if you were asked today to describe your childhood household, school, or friends?

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9. Discuss the timing of the Kurtz family trip. In what ways is it evidence that the public couldn't predict or believe the immense scale of Hitler's plan? When does "history" become "historical"—different from what we experience every day? Discuss what events in today's news you think will be significant seventy-five years from now.
10. When Glenn traveled to Nasielsk (a journey described in chapter 10), he had to reconcile the images of the past with the twenty-first-century realities of the town, including the demolition of the synagogue and the inhabitants' fears that "the Jews" would return to reclaim their stolen property. Beyond factual information, what did Glenn gain by retracing his grandfather's steps?
11. *Three Minutes in Poland* is filled with images of childhood and youth, reminders of the last generation that was born into Nasielsk's Jewish community. For the survivors who saw David's film, what did it mean to look at that period of their lives again?
12. Glenn asks in the first chapter, "What moments are worth recording?" What does his grandfather's home movie tell us about the beauty and significance of ordinary moments? Why is a record of ordinary moments and ordinary people—not just of the Holocaust period, but for every past epoch—important to historians?
13. Has the pervasiveness of modern video, from camera phones to YouTube, changed the way we see the world? What are the most meaningful photographs, home movies, and other visual artifacts in your family? Which lost chapters do they bring to life? And what previously hidden aspects of life do they make visible? How long do you think these videos will survive? Will the grandchildren of today's travelers be able to discover our lost world, as Glenn did for the people of Nasielsk?

PRAISE FOR *THREE MINUTES IN POLAND*

"*Three Minutes in Poland* begins as the story of an old family film rediscovered and veers into an important tale of the horrors of life and death in Polish shtetls during World War II. It is intensely moving and brilliantly researched, and it reads like a thriller." —Elie Wiesel, author of *Night*

"A masterpiece. With scrupulous intelligence and deep compassion, Glenn Kurtz tells this stupendous, terrifying, and ultimately consoling story in a way that fully honors the material. The reader grieves for what was lost, but is also alert to the miracle that anything was saved at all. Kurtz has done us all a great service in rescuing this tale from oblivion. *Three Minutes in Poland* is destined to be a classic." —Teju Cole, author of *Open City*

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“With nothing more to go on than three scant minutes in a family film, Glenn Kurtz has meticulously pieced together a luminous, searing story of a place and its people. I read this beautiful book wishing for nothing less than to turn back the clock and change the course of history. Kurtz is a restrained and elegant writer, and *Three Minutes in Poland* is not only a magnificent literary achievement, but a human one.” —Dani Shapiro, author of *Devotion*

“Glenn Kurtz’s beautifully written book is many things at once: a family memoir, a page-turning mystery, a penetrating look at one of the darkest chapters in human history. Above all, it’s a powerful testament to the singular worth of every life. That’s the passion that inspired Kurtz through his years of research, and I can’t think of a worthier one.” —Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, author of *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*

“Glenn Kurtz leads the reader on an inspiring journey through the forgotten past in this meticulous work of historical reconstruction. I was amazed by the patient forensic skill with which he followed the trail of a handful of images into a vibrant array of voices and visual memories. By helping his many interview subjects remember details of a world they themselves didn’t know they still carried inside, Kurtz discovers life where there had seemed only to be loss.” —George Prochnik, author of *The Impossible Exile*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Glenn Kurtz is the author of *Practicing: A Musician’s Return to Music* and the host of Conversations on Practice, a series of public conversations about writing held at McNally Jackson Books in New York City. He holds a Ph.D. from Stanford University. Visit GlennKurtz.com for more information.

Guide written by Amy Clements