

CHAPTER ONE  
**WHAT'S IN A NAME?**

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A short description of my father Werner Landecker's life gives you an idea of the truly profound and memorable things he must have experienced between his Berlin birth in 1911 and his Ann Arbor, Michigan death in 2003. He grew up a Jew in Nazi Germany — the last Jew to earn a law degree in Berlin before the war. He eventually escaped and immigrated to the United States, became a sociology professor at the University of Michigan, married a farm girl from Indiana, fathered two boys, and lost his sight early in his adulthood.

Dad obviously had some great stories. I wish I knew more of them.

**WERNER LANDECKER IN HIS OWN WORDS**

Shortly before my father died, my brother Tom managed to videotape him telling a few. This is one of my favorites. Family history down the toilet... *I was very close to my mother's family, and especially my grandmother Sophie Kahn. When I was an adolescent and visiting Grandmother in Berlin, my cousin and I became interested in our family history. Nobody seemed to know much about the earlier generations of Kahn's, but they remembered there was an old abandoned Jewish cemetery in town that might offer a few clues. So, we took along someone that could read Hebrew, and we found several gravestones. My cousin*

*took meticulous notes and wrote down all the names and dates from the gravestones, and he promised to do more research when he got home.*

*Unfortunately, that cousin lived in Hanover, and had to take a train back to his hometown. The bathrooms in those trains in the Weimar Republic days were notoriously bad, and this one was no exception. When he went into the bathroom stall, he noticed that they didn't have any toilet paper. Well, this was an emergency, and my cousin had only one piece of paper that would solve the problem; the piece of paper with all the notes about the family's history.*

*That Kahn family history was literally flushed down the toilet on a train to Hanover.*

## **A JEW IN NAZI GERMANY**

My father didn't talk about those days in Germany very much, unless we really pulled it out of him. He told us that when he was young, a kid was following him around one day, throwing matches at him. Dad responded by punching him.

Another time when he was a college student, he intentionally visited a library he knew was run by the Nazis. I asked him why in the world he would do that, knowing that as a Jew, he wouldn't be allowed to study there.

"I just wanted to see what it felt like," he said.

I think that describes my father perfectly.

He stayed in Germany longer than it was safe for Jews to stay there because he really wanted to finish his doctor of jurisprudence degree at the University of Berlin. He was the last Jew to receive that degree in pre-war Germany, but because he was a Jew, his dissertation was never published.

That 1936 dissertation is a story unto itself.

## RECORDS TRULY IS MY MIDDLE NAME

After he left Germany, Dad never gave it another thought. Then, in the mid 1990s, when Dad was in his eighties, an old German colleague of his, Professor Guenther Luschen, called up to say that he really wanted to publish it because he thought it was a historically important document. I can see why Professor Luschen felt that way. 1936 was no ordinary year in German history. It was the first full year the Nuremberg Laws were in effect.

The “Law for Protection of German Blood and Honor,” made it illegal for Jews to marry non-Jews. The “Reich Citizen Law” stripped German citizenship from anyone that had any Jewish blood — they became known as “subjects of the state.” And in 1936, Jews were banned from all professional jobs once and for all, officially ending any influence they may have had over politics, education, academia, and industry.

And what was my father’s dissertation about? The importance of international law.

I’ll say.

If you go looking for it on the internet, you’ll need to know what it’s called. In German it’s a mouthful. Try this one on for size: “*DIE GELTUNG DES VOLKERRECHTS ALS GESELLSCHAFTLISCHES PHANOMEN: EINERECHTS-UNDSOZIALWISSENSCHAFTLICHE ANALYSE AUS DEM JAHR 1936; HERAUSGEGEBEN VON GUNTHER LUSCHEN.*”

I put it in capital letters because I can’t picture anyone saying it without shouting. The English version isn’t much better: “The Importance of International Law as a Social Phenomenon: A Judicial and Sociological Analysis from the Year 1936.”

When it was finally published in 1999, 63 years after he originally wrote it, Dad was still alive to hear about it. Alive, but quite

frankly not doing too well. He was 88 years old. He had fallen and hit his head and it had a lasting effect.

Plus, becoming published was already old hat to him. To remain a tenured professor at a major institution you had to “publish or perish.” Teaching was not enough. My father had written countless papers for journals, and two textbooks: *Class Boundaries* and *Class Crystallization*. The idea that his work as a student in Germany would finally be published did not excite him.

I found it to be a fantastic story. I envision a modern day German classroom referencing this book as part of their course work. Maybe Dad was fine with leaving those things behind in Germany, and grateful those things didn’t make it out.

That’s really all we know about Dad’s time in Germany. Although he did tell my brother Tom another good story on that videotape. Werner Landecker in his own words regarding a family heirloom... *When my parents were fleeing the Nazis in 1939, the Nazis were still allowing Jews to ship their belongings — but not anything valuable, like artwork or jewelry.*

*My mother had a diamond pin that she really loved, and my father decided to take a risk to keep it. He bored a hole in some dining room furniture he was shipping, inserted the pin, and covered it up again. If this had been discovered, he almost certainly would have been imprisoned or killed. But he got lucky, and the furniture was shipped to Newark, New Jersey, and put in storage there.*

*When Marjorie and I were married, my mother decided she wanted Marjorie to have the pin, so she sent us to Newark to retrieve it. All of the furniture had been left out to rot on a dock somewhere, ruined by water damage, and picked apart by scavengers, but the pin was still there — hidden in the furniture.*

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*So we went out to dinner with the pin to celebrate. We had a nice dinner and were walking away from the restaurant when Marjorie suddenly realized ‘Oh no! I left the pin at the restaurant!’*

*It was still there when we went back for it, but we found it pretty funny that it got past the Nazis and the New Jersey dock workers, but we had managed to lose it in less than an hour.*

### **HOOSIER MAMA**

Mom was an Indiana girl through and through. How stereotypically Hoosier were my mother’s parents William J. Records and Ione Records? William was a farmer, and Ione was a grand champion blue-ribbon winner at the Indiana State Fair. I have an article about my grandmother in the local paper, and the reporter wrote: “If you took all her ribbons and stretched them from end to end, they’d go from here to waaaay out there.” She won ’em all: pies, bread, baking, and sewing. Multiple awards — year after year after.

My mom, Marjorie Victoria Records, grew up on the farm along with her three siblings Marvin, Virginia, and Jeannette. In some ways Mom was a typical Hoosier, but she was also unusual for her era. Mom reached out beyond the agricultural stereotype and went to college at Franklin College in Franklin, Indiana, and then to graduate school at Indiana University.

That was incredibly atypical for her time. Her parents didn’t go to college. The great majority of her Indiana relatives never went to college. (Only one of her sisters, Virginia, did.) The two Records girls that went to college really left the Indiana farmland behind. Virginia married a doctor and moved to South Carolina.

Mom met Dad. And according to urban legend, this is how it happened.

They were driving in separate cars in Brown County, which is in downstate Indiana — a beautiful vacation area about thirty miles from Bloomington. He was in one car, and she was in another. They came to a stop at an intersection, gazed into each other's eyes, and decided to go for coffee. The rest, as they say, is history. They were married for fifty years.

I can only imagine what it must have been like when my mom brought my father (a liberal, intellectual, German Jew and member of the NAACP and ACLU) to her farm in the heartland of conservative, Christian, rural Indiana, but if there were any stories of the Records clan not accepting Dad, I never heard one. In all the times we came to Indiana, there was nary a peep, hint, innuendo, or aside from anybody.

### **AND BABY MAKES THREE**

There's an old expression about the month of March; in like a lion and out like a lamb. Not necessarily. At 5:14 pm on March 28, 1947 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the lion was roaring.

Outside their small apartment on Washington Heights in Ann Arbor there was a white-out blizzard accompanied by sub-zero temperatures. Inside, Werner & Marjorie contemplated their situation. Marjorie's water had broken.

After clearing a path and walking very cautiously, Werner got Marjorie safely into the front seat and then prayed to the ignition gods that the car would start. It did. Since the weather was so bad, traffic was extremely light. That gave Werner the luxury of using the entire road to travel the relatively short distance to St. Joseph Hospital. With his right hand on the wheel, he used his left to open the window and reach out to help the overburdened windshield

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wipers keep the snow off the windshield so he could see where he was going.

Even though the temperature was below zero and the wind was howling, a small line of perspiration formed on Werner's forehead. As was her way, Marjorie was calm and reassured her husband that he was doing a great job getting them to the hospital and all would be well. When the car finally came to a stop at the entrance to the hospital, things began to move rather quickly. At approximately 7:40 pm on the evening of March 28, 1947, Werner Sigmund Landecker and Marjorie Victoria Landecker had a son.

That son was me.

I came out face first; a metaphor for how I would live the rest of my life. My face was covered with deep bruises, and my neck was grotesquely out of alignment. The bruises would fade, but the neck treatment required me to be placed between two sandbags until the neck and head assumed the proper position.

When they were sure I was healthy, they realized I needed a name. John was their choice for the first name and obviously Landecker for the last. In a nod to my mother's upbringing, they chose her maiden name, Records, as my middle name.

They had no way of knowing that their son would become a radio disc jockey, or that this name they had chosen would become my unlikely calling card.

But it is an absolutely true story. One that I have had to tell many, many times. One that my mother and father had to tell many, many times. (*The full transcript of Mom and Dad telling it on WLS Radio is in the appendix.*)

Even though nobody believes it: *Records Truly is My Middle Name.*

## CHAPTER TWO

**A BABY BOOMER'S CHILDHOOD**

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In the 1950s, Dwight D. Eisenhower was the U.S. President, and Elizabeth was the brand new Queen of England. The Cold War was at its nadir, and Senator Joseph McCarthy was conducting anti-American hearings in Washington, exposing alleged Communists. Even though Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus, and schools were ordered to integrate, America was still a very segregated country. The average American family earned about \$5,000 a year. Most historians consider the official beginning of the rock and roll era the release of Bill Haley's "Rock around the Clock" in 1955. The next year, Elvis Presley became the biggest star in the world, Alan Freed became the first famous rock and roll disc jockey in America, and every parent in the country was against everything all of that stood for.

If the stories I've been told about my childhood are true, some of my strengths and weaknesses were there from the very beginning. For instance, I had an aversion to taking responsibility for my actions. When I was very little, whenever I was going to be confronted or scolded for something I shouldn't have done, my immediate reaction was to say: "Look at the birdie! Look at the birdie!" As in, let's take our mind off our problems. (Years later my mother was diagnosed with cancer and I purchased a small wooden bird and gave it to her so that she could "look at the birdie." It was still on the kitchen table when she died.)



## RECORDS TRULY IS MY MIDDLE NAME

My poor mother also tried to teach me math, which is another of my lifelong weaknesses. She had to get creative to get through to me. Across the street from my school, Bach Elementary, there was a neighborhood store that sold penny candy and was run by a guy we called Johnny Gyp. He didn't really gyp people, but I suppose if you have an onslaught of elementary school people descend on your store after school every day, five days a week, you might turn into a "Johnny Gyp" too.

My mother would try to teach me how to add and subtract by telling me to go to the store and get penny candy. She would say, "let's say you have five pieces of penny candy, and three pieces that cost a nickel, how would you know how much to spend?"

My answer was: "Ask the man."

Who says a half-Jew needs to haggle?

Just as my weaknesses were there from the beginning, so were some of my strengths. I had a very early interest in performing. When I was really young I was in a play called *The Ugly Duckling*. I still have the program for that performance: It was Sunday, December 6, 1953, at 2pm. General admission was sixty-three cents plus tax, for a total of seventy-five cents. In a really strange twist of fate, the two ladies who put that play on were later married to two men that would have a very big impact on my radio career: Ted Heusel and Joel Sebastian.

It was also very important to me when I was in elementary school to be part of the cool crowd. There were a few fashion trends that came and went, and I had to be part of them. One of the odder ones was when all of the boys wore white nylon jackets, or windbreakers. I have no idea why those were considered cool, but they were, and I had to have one. We also wore these shirts that were designed to look to look a shirt with a sweater over it, like a cardigan.

They were actually just sewn that way. I have no idea why. They say that everything eventually becomes cool again, but we're still waiting for that white nylon jacket and fake cardigan look to come back in style.

1950s Ann Arbor was a very typical American experience in a lot of ways. The first time McDonald's came to town, it was a huge deal. Everybody had to ride their bikes over there to see this cool new hamburger place. I remember the menu distinctly. A hamburger was fifteen cents, French fries were ten cents, and a chocolate shake was twenty cents. I don't want to say this was very early in the McDonald's dynasty, but if you had a photograph of the McDonald's sign when it first debuted in Ann Arbor, it probably said: "150 sold."

## **INDIANA MEMORIES**

Because we lived in Ann Arbor, and Mom's family was in Indiana, we spent every vacation of my childhood in the Hoosier state. I loved going to Indiana, I loved going to my grandparents' farm, I loved going to the Indiana State Fair. It's where I discovered bumper cars and snow cones. But my favorite moments came when my blue-ribbon winning grandmother was baking at the farmhouse. Everything was made from scratch, no mixes. That meant homemade icing. I still love icing, probably because my grandmother always left a little bit in the bowl for young Johnny to scrape up with a spatula.

My grandparents' farm house didn't have central heating. In the winter, the upstairs was closed off and everyone slept on the first floor, which had a large gas furnace in the living room. When we visited for Christmas, my mom would sleep on the couch, and Grandpa Records set up three cots in the front room for Tom, Dad