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Nazis Killed Her Father. Then She Fell in Love With One.

Their billionaire descendants, who control Krispy Kreme

Krispy Kreme, Stumptown and other brands, are grappling with the exposure of an unspeakable secret.

Emilie Landecker, circa 1961. Her Jewish father, Alfred, was killed by the Nazis. When her children asked about the family's roots, she would admonish them to stop talking about "that old stuff."

By Katrin Bennhold

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1. Such appalling events

Emilie Landecker was 19 when she went to work for Benckiser, a German company that made industrial cleaning products and also took pride in cleansing its staff of non-Aryan elements.

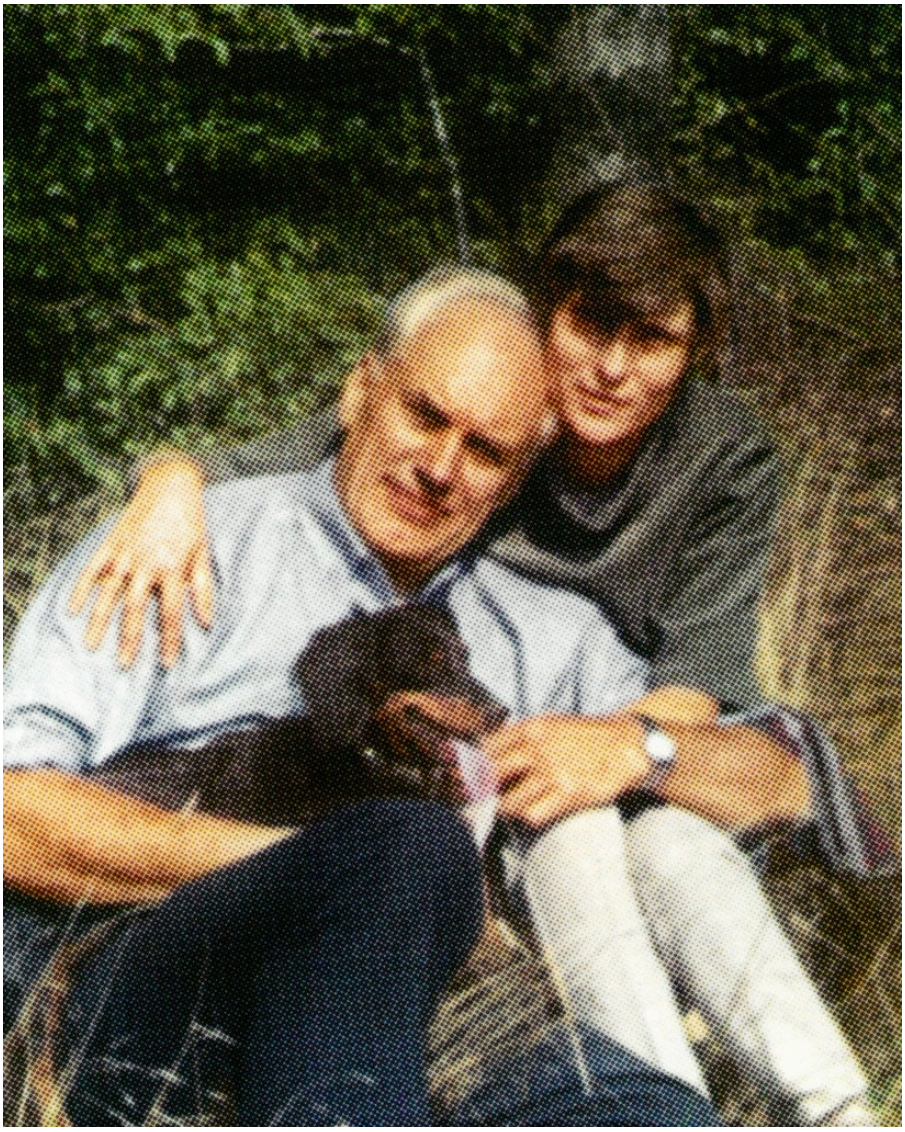
It was 1941. Ms. Landecker was half Jewish and terrified of deportation. Her new boss, Albert Reimann Jr., was an early disciple of Adolf Hitler and described himself as an "unconditional follower" of Nazi race theory.

Somehow, inexplicably, they fell in love.

The story of Ms. Landecker, whose Jewish father was murdered by the Nazis, and Mr. Reimann, whose fervent Nazism and abuse of forced laborers did not stop his family from attaining colossal wealth after the war, is a tale of death and devotion and human contradictions. It is also a tale of modern-day corporate atonement.

Decades after World War II, Benckiser evolved into one of the largest consumer goods conglomerates on the planet. Known today as JAB Holding Company and still controlled by the Reimann family, it is worth more than $20 billion and owns Krispy Kreme Doughnuts, Peet's Coffee, Einstein Bros. Bagels, Stumptown Coffee Roasters, Pret A Manger, Keurig and other breakfast brands.

The relationship between Mr. Reimann and Ms. Landecker was for many years a secret. He was married, but had no children with his wife. He and Ms. Landecker had three, and he adopted them in the 1960s; today, two of them own a combined stake in JAB of about 45 percent. For decades, they say, they did not know about their father's Nazism and the abuses that took place at the company they inherited: The female forced laborers who had to stand at attention outside their barracks naked. A prisoner of war who was kicked out of a bomb shelter and died.



Ms. Landecker and Albert Reimann Jr. No one knows exactly when their love affair began. The Reimann family

Mr. Reimann and Ms. Landecker, who died in 1984 and 2017, respectively, never spoke about those years. Incriminating documents were destroyed or locked away in a safe. A two-volume company history glossed over the Nazi era in a handful of pages. But as Benckiser grew, morphing into the globe-spanning JAB, its past became impossible to ignore. Peter Harf, who joined the company in 1981 and became chairman this year, and whose own father was a Nazi, said he never really bought the idea that the organization had nothing to hide.

“I knew the stories they told,” he said. “It didn’t smell right.”

Around 2012, as JAB was acquiring high-profile coffee brands and drawing global attention, Mr. Harf pressed the family to open its archives to an independent scholar. By 2016, Paul Erker, an economic historian at the University of Munich, took on the task.

Only now, 74 years after World War II, are the family and the company grappling with their dark and complicated history. In March, the first findings about the abuse of forced laborers at the company leaked in a German tabloid. Discovering Nazi activity in corporate history is a somewhat regular occurrence in the country, and the crimes of the Reimanns were not as severe as, for example, those of the many larger companies with ties to death camps and the expropriation of Jewish businesses. But JAB's portfolio of sunny coffee-and-doughnut brands in the United States made the revelations a global news story.

Its employees — there are 180,000 around the world — have reported that customers accuse them of "working for Nazis." There have been boycott threats; this month, The Boston Globe published a scathing article with the headline: "I found out Nazi money is behind my favorite coffee. Should I keep drinking it?"

The outrage has flared without the public knowing the full extent of Mr. Reimann's Nazi convictions — and without knowing the final wrenching twist: that the history of the Reimann family is one of both victim and perpetrator. The heirs carry both sides within them. In a series of interviews with The New York Times, members of the Reimann family spoke publicly for the first time about the Nazi scandal. They disclosed the story of Emilie Landecker's Jewish father, Alfred, and described how his murder has forced the clan to reckon not just with the past, but with the future.

The Reimanns say they will spend some of their private fortune to honor Alfred Landecker's memory. A one-time donation of 10 million euros (about $11.3 million) will go to institutions that help former forced laborers and their families. The Reimanns are also renaming their family foundation after him and doubling its budget to an annual €25 million, while ceding control of the board to an independent council. The foundation will fund projects that "honor the memory of the victims of the Holocaust and of Nazi terror," and there are plans to fund at least one university chair in Germany in Mr. Landecker's name.

A new website for the Alfred Landecker Foundation says its mission is to educate "about the Holocaust and the terrible price that is paid when intolerance and bigotry reign." It continues, "The intention is to help strengthen our capacity to recognize the beginnings of such hatred and resist a repeat of such appalling events."

In an interview, Mr. Harf noted that he lived in three places — New York, London and Milan — where nationalism and ethnic division were on the rise. For most of his long career, he said, he considered shareholder capitalism to be value neutral. No longer. In the age of Trump, Brexit and Matteo Salvini, he said, businesses can no longer pretend that they are operating in a "value-free space."

"This is once again a time when everybody needs to take a stance," Mr. Harf said. "I'm very scared of what's happening."

2. 'A purely Aryan family business'

In July 1937, Albert Reimann Jr. wrote a letter to Heinrich Himmler, the leader of the SS, who would later oversee the Holocaust.

“We are a purely Aryan family business that is over 100 years old,” wrote Mr. Reimann, then 39 and a senior executive in his father’s company. “The owners are unconditional followers of the race theory.”

The Reimanns had embraced National Socialism and anti-Semitism long before the Nazis came to power, according to an interim report by Mr. Erker, the historian. The younger Reimann heard Hitler speak in Munich in 1923 and became an early supporter. His father, Albert Reimann Sr., then the chief executive of Benckiser, heard him four years later in Mannheim, near the company’s southern German headquarters, and joined the Nazi party in 1931. His son followed a year later.

Around this time, the men gave the company a makeover in keeping with Nazi principles. By the time Hitler took over, Benckiser already housed a Nationalist Socialist Company Organization — a worker council that sought to uphold Nazi ideology. It later became a “model NS plant.”

“Reimann Sr. and Reimann Jr. were not just opportunistic followers of the regime,” Mr. Harf said. “They were fully signed up to the Nazi project.”

Benckiser was then a medium-size industrial chemicals company, making products such as citric acids, a chemical to soften water, supplements for infant food and phosphates used in sausage making. In 1933, it employed 181 people. As an important supplier to the food industry, Benckiser benefited from the Nazi system, more than tripling sales over the next decade. Mr. Reimann Sr. served as president of the regional Chamber of Industry and Commerce, which helped orchestrate the Aryanization, expropriation and expulsion of Jewish businesses.

Benckiser itself did not profit from businesses that had been taken from Jewish owners, and it never used concentration camp labor, as was common in bigger companies like Messerschmitt, a predecessor of Airbus, or IG Farben, which later split into companies including BASF and Bayer. But

starting in late 1940, the Reimanns routinely took advantage of forced labor: men and women taken from their homes in Nazi-occupied territories, as well as prisoners of war, who were allocated by the Nazis to farms and industrial companies across Germany.

It was around this time that Emilie Landecker started working in the accounting department as a clerk. Little is known about her time at the company during the war years, except that Mr. Reimann Jr. was now her boss. According to Mr. Harf, Benckiser's use of forced laborers grew so fast that she would surely have been aware of the abuses.

By 1943, 175 people, or a third of the total work force, were forced laborers, most of them from France and Eastern Europe. Benckiser operated two labor camps, one of them overseen by a brutal foreman, Paul Werneburg, who had been with the company since 1910. On his watch, female workers were forced to stand at attention naked outside their barracks, and those who refused risked sexual abuse. Workers were kicked and beaten, among them a Ukrainian woman who also cleaned in the Reimanns' private villa.

During a bomb raid on Jan. 7, 1945, Werneburg threw dozens of workers out of a camp bomb shelter. Thirty were injured, and one died. As word of Werneburg's brutality spread, even the local Nazi office in charge of allocating forced laborers reprimanded the Reimanns for mistreating their workers.

Ms. Landecker would have witnessed it all, said her son, Wolfgang Reimann, in an email. "She lived through the horror show happening in our own company," he said. "She probably sat in the very bunker when Werneburg threw out the workers."

The Reimanns' enthusiasm for Nazi ideology never waned, Mr. Erker's research shows. As late as February 1945, Mr. Reimann Jr. believed in the "Endsieg," Hitler's "final victory." The war ended that May; a month later, he was arrested and interned by the Allied occupying powers as part of the de-

Nazification process. Held in the A block in Camp 73 under prisoner number 2228, Mr. Reimann Jr. wrote a letter to the commanding officer on Sept. 22, dismissing allegations that he had been an "early and enthusiastic Nazi" as mere "denunciations" — and insisting that he was in fact a victim of the Nazis.

"I may conclude that under the circumstances I am at a loss to understand the origin of the above mentioned allegation," he wrote. "I am rather inclined to believe that I was myself closely surveyed by the Gestapo."

It worked. While the French initially barred Mr. Reimann Jr. from continuing his business activities, American officials overturned the judgment, classifying him as a "follower" of Nazism, rather than an active Nazi himself.

In 1947, the wealth of the Reimann family totaled 686,000 Reichsmark, or approximately $2.4 million in today's money. Over the decades, the fortune grew in step with Benckiser and its successor companies, and today the family's worth is estimated at €33 billion. On one recent list of the wealthiest families in Germany, the Reimanns ranked second.

Wolfgang Reimann said that the only thing his father ever told his children about the war was that the forced laborers had loved the company so much, they cried when the conflict ended and they had to leave.

"He claimed that the French workers often got some red wine on Saturdays," Wolfgang said, "and that transferees from other camps said that Benckiser was the best camp they had ever been in or heard of."

That's nonsense, he said, cursing.

3. Last letter from the ghetto

Ms. Landecker was at work at Benckiser when the Gestapo came for her father.

It was April 24, 1942. Around noon, two police officers arrived at the family apartment. Her younger brother, Wilhelm, who would later recollect the incident in an unpublished family memoir, opened the door.

“Is the Jew Alfred Israel Landecker here?” one of the officers asked.

Wilhelm led them to his father, who had been waiting. A letter had arrived that month, informing him of the date of his deportation. With Germanic precision, it had instructed him to pack one suit, some underwear and a coat with a yellow Star of David sewn to the front. No money or valuables were allowed.

“So, you dirty Jew,” the officer said. “Are you ready to take a trip?”

Alfred Landecker closed his suitcase and put on his coat. Then he hugged and kissed his son for the last time. “Willi, stay home so that no one associates my Star of David with you,” Mr. Landecker said, and then asked him to say goodbye to his sisters. “Give my love to Emmi and Gerdele. Behave, and obey God.”

A few weeks later, one last letter arrived from Mr. Landecker, but only the envelope has survived. It shows that he was interned in block III 416/2 in Izbica, a ghetto serving as a transfer point for the deportation of Jews to the Belzec and Sobibor death camps in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Mr. Landecker, a World War I veteran and successful accountant, had been a loving father. After his wife, a Catholic, died in 1928, he looked after their three children by himself. Emilie, the eldest, was 6 at the time.

The Nazis took over in 1933. Two years later, the Nuremberg laws, which institutionalized the Nazis’ race theories, stripped Jews of their citizenship rights. Around that time, Mr. Landecker did two things that would prove prescient. He made sure his children were baptized Catholic, like his late wife. And he officially transferred to them his main possessions, including the family apartment, so that they could not be expropriated.

But Mr. Landecker could not protect his family from an atmosphere that rapidly escalated from hostile to life-threatening — a shift he chronicled in a series of letters to his younger daughter, who was unwell and staying with his wife's sister in the Bavarian countryside at the time.

"My dear child," he wrote in December 1938, a month after Kristallnacht had seen synagogues and Jewish homes across Germany vandalized and burned. "The times have changed and with them the people."

"We fought for five years only to have an age like this," he wrote, referring to World War I. "I hope you, my dear children, remain well-behaved and good, and keep loving me, even if you suffer because of me."

Mr. Landecker was searching for a way to flee Germany — perhaps for the United States, where he had a brother and sister-in-law. "Aunt Pauline has written from America," he wrote that December. "She is trying for us, maybe things will work out." But there wasn't enough money. Mr. Landecker was not allowed to work, which meant that Emilie, still a teenager, became the family's only earner.

When Mr. Landecker received his deportation notice in April 1942, the family made one last desperate attempt to stop it. They took a train to Berlin to the office in charge of Jewish affairs, where Mr. Landecker's children showed officers their Catholic certificates. They were chased away.

"Crying, we went back to the hotel, where our father was waiting," Wilhelm Landecker wrote later. Despite the disappointment, their father got theater tickets for everyone that night in Berlin. A few days later, he wrote his last letter to Bavaria.

"My dear Gerdele," he wrote. "As you can see, I'm still here, but not for long. Today I learned that my departure is on the 24th of the month — in two days. So this is the last letter that you receive from me from here or perhaps ever.

We don't know what is waiting for us."

"I wish you all the best for the future, stay healthy and become decent human beings," he urged her. "If possible, I will write as soon as possible and hope that you won't entirely forget me."

"You won't be able to marry here in Germany," he continued. "Learn languages!! You have your future ahead of you — don't waste it."

"With this, my dear child, obey God, and please send my good wishes to everyone and be greeted by your Papa."

After her father was deported, Ms. Landecker continued working at Benckiser, becoming a trusted employee. When the war ended, Ms. Landecker would periodically bring Mr. Reimann Jr. papers to review in Heidelberg — making a perilous journey through bombed-out landscapes and an emergency bridge over the Rhine.

No one knows when exactly their love affair started. But in 1951, their first child was born. Two more followed. Twice a week, every Sunday and Wednesday, Mr. Reimann Jr. would leave his wife and visit Ms. Landecker.

She worked for Benckiser until 1965. That year, Mr. Reimann Jr. formally adopted their children. (His wife, Paula, had known of their relationship for some time.) The German authorities had long pressed Ms. Landecker for the name of her children's father, and she had refused to give it away. But years later, she admitted in a letter to Mr. Reimann Jr. that she always missed not being his wife — and not having a regular family.

"And now I would like to also say something about our relationship," Ms. Landecker wrote. "I think I need you much more than you need me, because I take up only a relatively small part of your life."

“I am despite everything a woman,” she wrote. “You were and are the only person, to whom I can talk.”

“Today I know of course that it wasn’t a lack of willingness on your part, but I missed it nevertheless and I did not want to make demands that cannot be fulfilled under the given circumstances.”

Ms. Landecker was a quiet woman. She did not speak much. But her children say that despite everything, she loved their father. “I never understood why,” said Wolfgang Reimann. “He was not very lovable from my perspective.”

For decades, the children knew that their parents had met “at the company.” They knew that their maternal grandfather, Alfred, had been murdered by the Nazis. But until this year, they did not know that their father had been a fervent Nazi. When the children asked about the family’s Jewish roots, Wolfgang said, Ms. Landecker would speak evasively of growing up in a “Jewish milieu,” and then admonish her children to stop talking about “that old stuff.”

“My mother never said anything,” Wolfgang Reimann said. “For the longest time, I believed it was her personality.” But he has changed his mind. “If I had to live with the love of my life, as my mother did, and this person was also responsible for the terrible things that happened during the war, I would not have spoken much, either, I guess,” he said.

4. The order of the day

Nearly every German company that has been around long enough has a story about the Nazi era. Many have been told. But many have not. Bahlsen, the cookie maker, commissioned a study on its war years only last month, after a young heiress flippantly played down the company’s use of forced labor.

International expansion has often been a trigger for German companies to reckon with their pasts. That was the case with the Reimanns' properties. Over the years, Benckiser went through mergers and spinoffs; it combined with another firm to become the consumer-product giant Reckitt Benckiser, known for such brands as Lysol and Durex condoms, and eventually, the Reimanns channeled much of their wealth into JAB. In recent years the holding company has spent billions to become a rival to the likes of Starbucks and Nestlé by buying chains including Panera Bread, Krispy Kreme and Pret A Manger. Last year, it also helped Keurig Green Mountain buy Dr Pepper Snapple for nearly $19 billion. JAB also controls the cosmetics giant Coty, the owner of Calvin Klein fragrances.

As scrutiny of the company grew, Mr. Harf urged the Reimann family to take the initiative and research its history — before someone else got there first.

Peter Harf, who became chairman of JAB this year, said he never really believed the idea that the company had nothing to hide. “I knew the stories they told,” he said. “It didn’t smell right.” Andrea Mantovani for The New York Times

The Nazi revelations have stirred the youngest Reimanns. “When I heard and read of the atrocities committed at Benckiser, sanctioned by my grandfather, I felt like throwing up,” said Martin Reimann, 30, who is a grandchild to Ms. Landecker and Mr. Reimann Jr. “I cannot claim that I was very interested in politics before. I was just living my life. But after what happened, I changed my mind. I have to do something. In our family council, the younger generation created a little bit of a rebellion.”

By renaming its foundation after Alfred Landecker, the Reimann family is bringing back one name from the millions killed by the Nazis. But it is also explicitly linking the memory of crimes past to today’s fight to preserve the values of liberal democracy.

“What we can learn from history and how we can learn from history is at the core of this foundation,” said Norbert Frei, the chairman of its academic advisory council. A respected German historian at Jena University, he has led investigations into the Nazi pasts of other companies, including Bertelsmann.

“This is not just about researching and remembering the past,” he added. “It’s about stabilizing and maintaining democracy today.”

Mr. Harf, JAB’s chairman, agrees. He said he had recently read “The Order of the Day,” a historic novella by Éric Vuillard set in the years before World War II. One scene takes place in February 1933, when Hitler and the president of

the Reichstag encourage 24 German industrialists to donate to the Nazi party. The businessmen — representing companies that are still prominent German corporate names, like Siemens, Bayer and Allianz — duly open their wallets.

JAB Holding Company, controlled by the Reimann family, is worth more than $20 billion and owns brands including Krispy Kreme, Keurig coffee and Pret A Manger.
Simon Hofmann/Getty Images

Mr. Harf said it made him think that not enough voices in business were speaking up against the re-emergence of nationalism and populism in Europe and the United States. Every time business leaders make decisions, he said, they should ask, “What does this mean for our children? What does it mean for the future?”

“In history, businesses have enabled populists,” he added. “We mustn’t make the same mistake today.” Then he quoted the Holocaust survivor Simon Wiesenthal: “For evil to flourish, it only requires good men to do nothing.”

He added, “As the successors and descendants of people who committed horrendous acts, it is vital that our generation accepts what has happened, that we do whatever we can to bring tolerance and equality to the communities in which we live, and to ensure that the actions of Albert Reimann Sr. and Albert Reimann Jr. are a part of history which is never repeated.”

Correction: *June 14, 2019*
An earlier version of this article misstated the given name of Albert Reimann Jr.’s father. He was Albert Reimann Sr., not Alfred.

A version of this article appears in print on June 16, 2019, on Page BU1 of the New York edition with the headline: Nazis Killed Her Father. Then She Fell in Love With One.

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