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Did a famed connoisseur of political memorabilia commit an audacious crime?

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On a warm Saturday in early July, an employee at the Maryland Historical Society placed a call to the police. He had noticed two visitors behaving strangely—a young, tall, handsome man with high cheekbones and full lips and a much older, heavier man, with dark, lank hair and a patchy, graying beard. The older man had called in advance to give the librarians a list of boxes of documents he wanted to see, saying that he was researching a book. At some point during their visit, the employee saw the younger man slip a document into a folder. When the police arrived, they found 79 documents in a laptop bag and took the two men into custody.

The younger man was Jason Savedoff, a 24-year-old Canadian-American dual citizen and aspiring model who had attended McGill University. But it was the older man whose identity quickly attracted national attention. He was a 63-year-old presidential historian named Barry Landau, who for many years had moved in the most rarefied circles of American life.

According to Landau’s website, he had “served nine Presidents and worked with every White House since Lyndon Johnson’s.” A search for his name in news accounts finds him appearing, Zelig-like, alongside numerous political luminaries: shopping in Georgetown with Alice Roosevelt Longworth, planning a luncheon for Lady Bird Johnson, accompanying Richard Nixon to the Soviet Union, dancing with Betty Ford (and getting cut in on by Fred Astaire), accompanying President Jimmy Carter on the day that he kissed Queen Elizabeth on the lips, escorting Matthew Broderick and Sarah Jessica Parker to the 1997 Clinton inaugural parade. There are photos of him with Nixon, the Fords, the Reagans, with George H.W. Bush and Barbara Bush, and with every member of the Clinton family individually. His 2007 book, The President’s Table: Two Hundred Years of Dining and Diplomacy, received a glowing blurb from Arthur Schlesinger Jr.—“Landau weaves these previously missing links of Presidential history into a fascinating tapestry and narrative of Presidential lore”—and, in the acknowledgments, the author thanks Diane Sawyer, Oprah Winfrey, and Mike Wallace for their encouragement.

Landau described himself on his website as “America’s Presidential Historian,” but what he was really known for was his vast collection of political memorabilia—some 1.2 million items, by his own count. It included 26,000 menus, a turquoise belt buckle that a group of Indian tribes gave Ulysses S. Grant, Frank Sinatra’s ticket to the 1945 inauguration, an invitation to the birthday party at which Marilyn Monroe serenaded John F. Kennedy, and a key to the White House. In 2005, Larry Bird, a curator at the Smithsonian, told The Washington Post that Landau’s collection of inaugural memorabilia rivaled the Smithsonian’s own. Landau himself begged to differ: “Mine is much better,” he told the reporter.

After Landau and Savedoff were arrested, a bulletin went out alerting similar institutions to the thefts, and, in the days that followed, nervous librarians around the country checked their logs to see if the pair had been there. In several historical repositories, including the New-York Historical Society, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum in Hyde Park, New York, and the Connecticut Historical Society, it emerged that they had. Savedoff had used the names Justin Ward and Jason James; Landau had used his own. They had visited the Maryland Historical Society at least once before in June, bringing cupcakes for the library staff. A senior director at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Lee Arnold, told The New York Times that the men had come to the library 17 times, giving staffers Pepperidge Farm cookies and donating a copy of Landau’s book. Landau, he recalled, had referred to Savedoff as his nephew. Arnold also told The Baltimore Sun that Landau “had class” and “knew how to conduct himself in a research library” but that Savedoff was “rough around the edges.” His staff had become suspicious after they tried to send Landau a thank-you note, and it was returned to them because the post office was unable to deliver it to the given address.

In the days after the arrests, investigators conducted two searches of Landau’s $2,700-a-month rent-controlled Manhattan apartment. Prosecutors said the place was “chocked full wall to wall” with historical artifacts. Investigators found coats and sports jackets with specially tailored, deep interior pockets, as well as IDs that had allegedly been stolen from a New York City gym. They also found precision knives, purportedly used to remove museum markings so that the origin of the documents could not be traced. Police had earlier found a list of 200 historical figures with annotations of the estimated market value of documents they authored. Eventually, investigators removed more than 10,000 documents and gave them to the National Archives and Records Administration, where they could

Landau boasted that his collection of inaugural memorabilia was better than the Smithsonian’s.
be catalogued and, if necessary, returned to their rightful owners.

Landau and Savedoff were indicted in U.S. District Court on two counts of conspiracy and theft of major artwork—charges that carry a maximum sentence of 15 years. The six-page indictment alleged that, in early December 2010, at the FDR presidential library, the duo had stolen seven “reading copies” of Roosevelt’s speeches, each marked with his scrawled notes. The following March, Landau and Savedoff allegedly stole a letter from Benjamin Franklin to John Paul Jones from the New-York Historical Society, which prosecutors valued at $100,000. Sixty documents had been taken from the Maryland Historical Society alone, including a land grant dated June 1, 1861, signed by President Abraham Lincoln and worth more than $5,000. By the time Landau was released to home detention in August, prosecutors were indicating that a total of 200 documents had been stolen from various institutions around the country, a feat that the inspector general of the National Archives called “truly breathtaking.”

**Late one afternoon, not long after Landau had returned to his home, I called him on my cell phone from a crowded Starbucks near his apartment. To my surprise, he picked up, and I introduced myself as a reporter for The New Republic. Landau told me that he couldn’t discuss his case, but he turned out that he had plenty to say about his life in the political world. Although he sounded tired, and he paused often to cough, he was genial and solicitously polite.**

Landau explained that he had been going through some mementos he’d planned to send to President George H.W. Bush and his wife, Barbara. “It’s funny, I’m putting my apartment back together, I wonder what George and Barbara Bush think, or Mrs. Reagan,” he said. I noted that perhaps they would not have heard about his arrest, but Landau quickly dismissed this suggestion. “I’m sure Mrs. Reagan knows by now, because we have a lot of friends in common,” he said.

“The last time I saw President Bush senior,” he went on, “we were at an event. You know, we are both Geminis and have problems with coughs and lungs, and I was giving him a Halls cough drop.” At that point, Landau said, a Secret Service agent intervened. “[The agent] didn’t know we were friends; there was a new detail. [Bush] said, ‘He is not going to poison me!’ He’s really sweet, I love that man.”

As we were talking, Landau was rustling through some of the items in his collection that had not been removed in the FBI search. He read a letter from the Bushes thanking him for a pair of sweaters he’d once sent them. I asked Landau how many times he’d met the first President Bush. “How many times did I meet him?” he scoffed, as if I’d asked him to count the number of times he’d spoken to his own brother. “Hundreds of times!”

While he was talking about his famous friends, Landau was voluble and cheerful. But, whenever I asked him about his origins, he would become evasive. I asked where he grew up, and he said, “New York,” and then, quickly: “I’m looking at what time you called—at four fifty-one. . . We’ve been talking for over an hour with you writing copious notes down.”

He did, however, mention his mother a few times, indicating that they were very close. I inquired if she was still alive. “No, she passed away. In that regard, I’m glad that she isn’t [alive], because she would be so distressed about all of this,” he said. “It’s kind of like when John Kennedy Junior was killed, I was so glad that Jackie wasn’t alive, because that just would’ve killed her.”

At one point, he explained how he had associated with such an astonishing array of political figures over the years. “Many people look at me as an enigma. They can’t ever categorize me,” Landau said. “What brings people together sometimes are the oddest things. What brought Bill Clinton and I together is that we were both collectors.”

He went on: “Connections with people are very personal. . . Sometimes people wonder, my God, how does he do this? Who is Barry Landau?”

**Landau’s interest in famous political figures began early in life.** He grew up in Queens, the son of a theater ticket broker. He wasn’t close to his father but adored his mother, Eva, calling her his “very best friend” and “the best mother in the world.” A sickly child, plagued with asthma, chronic bronchitis, and allergies, he spent a lot of his time inside, reading voraciously and developing an intense curiosity about presidents. “Something,” he later wrote, “made me want to meet as many important people as I could.”

Landau has often recounted to reporters the story of how, at the age of ten, he and his mother were at LaGuardia Airport when they saw President Eisenhower arriving. The young boy saluted the president and told Mamie Eisenhower how beautiful she was, at which point she kneeled down to give him a kiss. That night, he went home and wrote the president a thank-you note. The first couple invited him to the White House. While he was waiting for the president to return from a golf game, the young boy made himself at home, marking his birthday on a desk calendar. When Eisenhower came in, Landau chided him for wearing his golf shoes on the wooden floor.

During his youth, Landau led what seemed like a charmed life, making fortuitous connections with some of America’s most prominent families. “I went to camp in New England with Jacqueline Kennedy’s brother and sister,” he once explained to The Indianapolis Star. “My parents were going through a divorce, and the Kennedys, knowing I loved animals, used to invite me down to their big estate in Virginia. I met the Johnsons through the Kennedys.” It was his friendship with Luci Baines Johnson, he went on, that led to an internship in LBJ’s White House, which in turn provided the foundation for a career planning White House events.

But Landau’s first appearance in the public record was connected to a very different world altogether. It was the dregs of the 1970s, and Landau was living in New York, where he had become a regular at Studio 54. The most famous document of those times is, of course, Andy Warhol’s diaries, in which Landau pops up more than 20 times.

In the Studio 54 scene, celebrity was the only currency that mattered. Warhol’s own diary entries are packed with bold-faced names; a description of a party at Woody Allen’s reads, concisely, “wall-to-wall famous people, we should have gone earlier.”

But, even in this milieu, Landau had an eagerness to be around celebrities that made others uncomfortable. In one entry, Warhol writes of “Barry Landau, that creepy guy we can’t figure out, who somehow gets himself around everywhere with every celebrity.” At another point, Warhol mentions having a conversation with a friend in which “we did the running routine about Barry Landau of ‘How’s your friend?’ ‘I thought he was your friend.’ ‘He’s not my friend, I thought he was your friend.’” At a party, Warhol recalls, “Barry Landau was with me like glue, every step I would take he was right there, and if I’d think of a clever new step to get away from him, he’d still be right there.”

Warhol and his friends couldn’t figure out exactly what Landau did. He claimed to be in public relations but seemed to have few real clients. Sometimes, his p.r.
work was apparently unsolicited. Warhol writes that Diane de Beauvau, a young French model, told him that Landau had asked her if she wanted to be on “The Mike Douglas Show.” Assuming he was offering as a favor, she said yes. Landau then sent her a bill for $2,000. People called him “Triggerman,” because he was constantly snapping their pictures on his Polaroid. This made a lot of Studio 54 habitués nervous—for good cause, as it soon turned out.

On August 28, 1979, Warhol’s diary records, “On the front page of the [New York] Post was a big picture of Barry Landau saying that he saw Hamilton Jordan at Studio 54 asking where he could get coke.” Hamilton Jordan happened to be President Carter’s chief of staff, and the allegations caused a major sensation.

And Landau wasn’t the only accusation—he was joined by Studio 54 co-owner Steve Rubell and a drug dealer named Johnny Dio. The Justice Department appointed a special prosecutor to investigate.

But Jordan was never charged. This was in part because Landau proved to be a very unreliable witness. Years later, Arthur Christy, the special prosecutor, recalled to the Associated Press that he became so frustrated with Landau that he shoved him up against a wall. “It was apparent that Mr. Landau was not telling the truth,” Christy said.

It also became apparent that Landau had been pressuring Jordan for favors for some time. Jordan’s assistant testified that her boss had instructed her to send a telegram from the Carters to a client of Landau’s, Broadway star Lucie Arnaz, to congratulate her on an opening. After that, the secretary said Landau called her repeatedly seeking other favors for clients, like a tour of the White House or a staged meeting with the Carters at the Kennedy Center.

The secretary thought he was a “creep” and said other administration staffers had warned her that he was a “pest” and a “con artist.”

Landau clearly craved access to the first family. But he may have craved acceptance from Studio 54’s inner circle even more. At the time the Jordan story exploded, Rubell and his co-owner, Ian Schrager, were facing prison terms for tax evasion. At one point, Warhol suggests that the accusations against Jordan were a ploy by Rubell to get a more lenient sentence on the tax charges. “He said wasn’t it great what Barry was doing, and for a second I forgot Barry was doing it for Steve and so I started to say how horrible Barry was, but I caught myself,” Warhol writes. “It’s Steve’s deal with the government—if he gives them names he’ll get a better deal. So Barry’s helping him give names.” The gambit failed; after the Jordan case fell apart, both Rubell and Schrager were convicted on the tax charges and went to jail.

After the Jordan debacle, Landau’s life disintegrated. The New York Post reported that he was suing former client Phyllis Diller over a $1,000 bill for publicity work. Calling Landau a “real con,” Diller said Landau had shown up in Los Angeles and Las Vegas uninvited and made long-distance calls from her hotel room. Alice Roosevelt Longworth’s granddaughter, Joanna Sturm, called him a “thief” in The Washington Post—ostensibly, Landau said, because of valuable things Longworth had given him. He was evicted from his swanky apartment on East 66th Street for failing to pay about four months rent. A management staffer who worked at the building recalls him “covering” in the hallway as the movers carried out a Warhol silkscreen.

O ver the next decade, Landau worked hard to reinvent himself. By the 1990s, he had become a fixture at political collecting shows, often accompanied by his black standard poodle, Topper. Landau doted on Topper; a friend who knew him during the ‘90s told me that he would sometimes ask the French restaurant on his block for steaks and hamburgers to feed him.

When it came to collecting, Landau knew his stuff. He was genuinely captivated by the lost traditions of the American presidency, speaking with longing about “how he was feeling, sometimes just to tell a story,” Daniel says. Finally, Daniel stopped answering. “He was just too much,” he says, “and I had a wife and children and a job.”

After his mother’s death, Landau threw himself into work on his first book. He had met with a New York agent, Marianne Strong, who told me she brokered a meeting with HarperCollins for him. But Landau kept avoiding signing a contract for her representation. In one letter, he wrote, “I am just now coming out of a major depression following my mother’s death, and taking things very slowly.” Then, sud-
denly, he informed Strong that he had signed a deal directly with HarperCollins. He had never intended to enlist her as his agent, he told her in an e-mail, and presented any such suggestion: “Frankly, not since the Japanese continued to negotiate with the American diplomats in Washington while the Japanese fleet were already executing their plan to bomb Pearl Harbor have I been privy to such egregious and outrageous stabbing in the back behavior.”

Despite this unpleasantness, the publication of his book in 2007 marked a high point for Landau. The President’s Table is not a scholarly work—rather, it is an elaborate coffee table book detailing White House etiquette and social traditions, illustrated lavishly with photos of items mostly from Landau’s own collection. As was common with Landau, he ignored the substance of politics and instead focused on its social trappings—as if presidents and their families were America’s royalty and Washington was their court. The book was well-received: Photos on Landau’s website show him smiling and holding the book with Doris Kearns Goodwin and Michael Beschloss, and Henry Kissinger called it “a social history that is great fun to read.”

By that time, Landau was frequently sought out as a media commentator on presidential matters. He often appeared in a three-piece suit with a white vest, bearing exquisitely chosen props from his collection. On the “Today” show to discuss the wedding of Chelsea Clinton (a “loving, loving girl”), he displayed a silver, engraved token that Jackie Bouvier gave to her bridesmaids. On “Good Morning America” to discuss Ronald Reagan’s funeral, he brought a ticket to Lincoln’s funeral and the program that was handed out at FDR’s. He brought china to Martha Stewart’s show, and the name of the restaurant, but it seems likely to be Rue 57, on Landau’s block. A manager there told me that Landau had been “encouraged not to return” to the restaurant for other reasons, some time before his arrest.)

One weekend, I visited the Antiques Garage, a Chelsea flea market that Landau had frequented for many years and where he was well-known to the dealers who manned the booths. Several months before his arrest, Landau had started attending the market with an attractive young man—Jason Savedoff.

Savedoff hailed from the upscale Vancouver neighborhood of Kitsilano, where his mother owns a $2.3 million house (his parents are divorced). He enrolled at St. George’s School, a posh, all-boys prep school where students wear gray slacks, ties, and blazers, and are expected to go...
Brachfeld told me that the National Archives possesses as many documents as "flecks of sand on a beach." The collection is so vast, in fact, that the agency doesn’t know exactly what it owns. Then there are the millions of documents housed in historical societies and universities across the country, where archiving and security procedures vary wildly. Bruce Gimelson, a dealer of American historical documents and paintings, was once doing research at a sizeable institution when he stumbled upon a letter from Thomas Paine to Congress that had been "flecks of sand on a beach." The first thing I noticed was that he was a very intelligent kid," she says. But something about him put her on edge. "All of a sudden, he just didn’t need to be booked anymore," Willard recalls.

Nobody would—or could—tell me how Landau and Savedoff first met or what the nature of their relationship was. Lynn von Furstenberg, a friend of Landau’s for 30 years, never met Savedoff but recalls that Landau “was always saying he was very thoughtful and nice.” Nevertheless, something about the way Landau talked about Savedoff made her uneasy. And, after the pair began visiting the Antiques Garage together, dealers there became increasingly suspicious about them. One, named Jaime Vallejo, told me that, on one occasion, he caught Savedoff trying to put a valuable piece of Steuben glass in his pocket. To let him know he’d seen him, Vallejo told Savedoff, “It’s two hundred fifty dollars for the pair.” After that, Vallejo started watching the two men and says he saw Savedoff trying to steal a pair of silver saltcellars from the booth of another dealer named Chuck, who asked me not to use his last name. (Chuck didn’t see the theft but said he’d noticed Landau pacing suspiciously by his booth. The saltcellars were worthless, he added.) Vallejo said that Landau “would become very friendly with the dealer so the dealer would have confidence and trust, and he’d have more access to the stuff, so, being as he is friendly, you don’t watch him, and the meantime, the other guy” would put things in his pocket. Vallejo described Savedoff as “nice looking, skinny, and well-dressed.” He added, “[You’d] never imagine he was stealing things.”

O ne of the most disturbing lessons of the Landau case is that it is not terribly difficult to steal valuable historical documents. At a court hearing, I met Paul Brachfeld, the inspector general of the National Archives. Brachfeld, formerly of the Secret Service, founded the agency’s investigative division, which is assisting the FBI with the case. It is the most exciting thing he has worked on since former National Security Adviser Sandy Berger got caught stuffing classified documents in his suit jacket.
been incorrectly catalogued and which he estimated was worth $50,000. At one point, the three librarians went to lunch, leaving Gimelson unsupervised in the reading room.

So far, prosecutors say that investigators have found the true owners of 2,000 of the 10,000 documents that were seized from Landau’s apartment—meaning that the scale of the evidence against Landau has expanded significantly from the number Landau and Savedoff were initially accused of stealing. Investigators assumed that the men planned to sell these artifacts. John Reznikoff, a dealer of historical documents, told me that Landau called him on December 13, 2010, offering to sell some speeches by Eisenhower at the airport—contained at least a kernel of truth. The Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum sent me a copy of the letter that Landau wrote to the president dated October 12, 1958. “Dear Mr. President,” the boy wrote, “I’ve been reading a book about you, and I think you lived the most exciting and the most interesting life than any other president of our United States. I got the thrill of my life when I saw you on Sunday at La Guardia Airport. I thought you were very handsome and your wife was very beautiful too.” He requested an autograph for his “album of great men.”

In a note dated three days later, the president’s secretary, Ann Whitman, replied: “The President asked me to thank you for the friendly interest that prompted your recent letter. At the President’s request, I am happy to send you the enclosed White House card. It comes with his very best wishes.” Although the details change in Landau’s multiple retellings of the story, it usually ends in a visit to the White House. But Whitman’s letter reads like a form response, and the Eisenhower library has no record of Landau ever visiting the White House. A year later, Landau wrote again to Eisenhower to ask for his autograph and makes no mention of either meeting the president in person or visiting him in Washington.

Landau’s most prized credential was that he had planned important events for every president since Lyndon Johnson. In an interview with the Associated Press, he said he was “assistant chief of protocol” for the Ford administration. During his Google lecture, he said he acted as a consultant to various administrations: “When a state dinner’s going to take place, I will meet with the corresponding people in that country. I will make suggestions, whether it’s the president of Italy, the prime minister of England or France, and say what might be appropriate entertainment.”

However, Maria Downs, a former social secretary for Gerald Ford, says the extent of his relationship with the White House was to attend one state dinner as the guest of another guest. “He never had a job in the Ford White House,” she said. “He must talk a hell of a good song to fool so many people.” Nor did he work for the Carter administration, according to the Jimmy Carter Library and Museum. He claimed to have witnessed Carter kiss Queen Elizabeth, but the library said there was no record of his presence at that meeting. Selwa “Lucky” Roosevelt, a former chief of protocol under Reagan, told me Landau had not worked in her office, and Gahl Burt,
a social secretary in the Reagan White House, wrote in an e-mail that Landau had nothing to do with the White House during her tenure.

The George Bush Presidential Library and Museum has no record of Landau having served in the White House in an official capacity. Mary Mel French, chief of protocol in the Clinton administration, says: “He never worked for President Clinton’s administration in Washington at all. Period.” And the George W. Bush administration told The Washington Post that, contrary to Landau’s claims, he’d never had any part in planning the 2005 inauguration. Laura Bush’s former chief of staff, Anita McBride, told me she spoke with him once on the phone and found him to be an “extraordinarily pushy character.” She adds, “It never went beyond one phone call, because the conversation was one that was suspicious to me.”

I also spoke to former White House employees whose service spanned several administrations. Catherine Fenton, social secretary to Laura Bush and deputy social secretary under Barbara Bush and Nancy Reagan, says she never met Landau and remembers his name only vaguely. Betty Monkman, who started working in the White House curator’s office during the Johnson administration and retired in 2002, remembers Landau dropping by the office over the years. His ability to get meetings mystified her. “I felt that he was using the White House for his own benefit,” she says. “There are people that are genuine, valid collectors—I never felt that way about him.” But perhaps the most authoritative source was Rex Scouten, who served every president from Truman to Clinton as, variously, a Secret Service agent, White House chief usher, and White House curator. As chief usher for Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan, he was in charge of carrying out White House events. Scouten told me that the White House didn’t use freelance event planners for official functions. Landau, he says, was simply one of many people who pestered the White House with calls. “I didn’t think he was a threat or anything, but I didn’t have much faith in what he had to say,” he recalls. “He had a great fantasy. He really could tell stories.”

W hen I called Landau in August, he had initially not wanted to talk to me at all. But, just as I thought he was about to hang up the phone, he asked me why the name on the caller ID, Boyden Gray, looked familiar to him. I explained, sheepishly, that I’m still on my father’s cell phone plan, and so his name appears on the caller ID. My father had worked as counsel to George H.W. Bush, I told Landau. Perhaps that’s why he knew the name? Landau stayed on the phone. “I like the fact that your ID said Boyden Gray,” he said. “Just from your credentials, you sound like somebody I’d [like] to talk to.”

In retrospect, I now see this as a technique that he often employed. An old New York acquaintance of Landau’s had told me that his “biggest secret” was to befriend the non-famous relatives of well-known people. “I saw him twice with Gwyneth Paltrow at parties,” the acquaintance said. “He had a picture with her father, and he told her that he knew her father.”

During that conversation, I decided to make one last effort to meet him in person, and asked if I could send him some magazines. He demurred but, perking up, told me about a place in the Le Parker Meridien hotel nearby that served “the best hamburgers.” He asked for a bacon cheeseburger and a vanilla shake, and promised to pay me back.

I got the food and made my way to his building. The lobby has marble floors and is decorated with chandeliers, paintings, and plush furniture. When I reached his floor, Landau was standing in the doorway of his apartment. His feet were bare and he wore loose gray sweatpants and a t-shirt that read, “If you want a friend in Washington—get a dog.” Sweat was collecting on his forehead, and he took the food and apologized for not inviting me in, explaining that he was not well. Still, he was watching me keenly. At one point, he commented on the way I was point, he commented on the way I was dressed. He took the food and apologized for not inviting me in, explaining that he was not well. Still, he was watching me keenly. At one point, he commented on the way I was standing and asked me if I was a dancer; at another, he pointed to the ring on my finger and asked if I was engaged. This, I came to realize, was how Landau collected people like he collected objects: by amassing tiny details about a person that could be used to convey a plausible sense of familiarity when he spoke about them to others.

Before I left, he ducked inside to retrieve the thank-you note from George and Barbara Bush he’d referred to earlier. “I wonder what [Bush] would say if he heard about this,” he said, returning to a previous theme in our conversation. “He would just say, ‘I can’t believe it. He really is a sweet man.”

Not long afterward, I asked Barbara Bush about Landau. She remembered meeting him but said he was not close with the family. “He was a name-dropper,” she said.

L andau’s trial begins on February 13. He declined to comment on the allegations made against him in court or on a series of questions I faxed him regarding his biography and career. I also sent his lawyers a detailed list of queries about both the case and Landau’s life. One of his attorneys, Andy White, would only say, “We are still in the process of working with prosecutors and evaluating the evidence, and we cannot comment at this time.”

If Landau is guilty, the question of why he might have stolen a vast trove of historical artifacts remains something of a mystery. If he and Savedoff intended to profit from the sale of historical documents, they seem to have made curiously little headway. And Landau is hardly a rich man. His lawyer told the court that his bank accounts contained about $1,600 after he had paid his rent, and his 2010 tax returns showed an income of just $11,000. In October, Landau obtained permission from the court to sell an Andy Warhol print in order to cover his expenses.

As I met people who knew Landau in the world of historical Americana, many of them spoke to me about the lure of collecting. To some, it’s a way of displaying wealth and knowledge; to others, it’s a fascination with history. But I was struck by the notion advanced by one collector: that surrounding yourself with cherished objects can provide a sense of security, even of belonging. “People collect because it gives them a tangible hold on something,” he told me. But, he added, “when people become obsessed with their collecting and their hobby, they no longer own their collection. The collection owns them.”

If there is anything impressive about Barry Landau, it is how hard he worked. Nearly everyone he came into contact with suspected that there was something a little off about him. But, because of everything he collected—all the photos, the letters, the press clippings, the endless trivial anecdotes—Landau managed to gain access to some of the most powerful and protected people in America. He constructed the appearance of a glamorous life simply through the grind of relentless networking. As an acquaintance of Landau’s, Joan Benny, the daughter of the comedian Jack Benny, told me, Landau was “a poor soul who had visions of grandeur and mingled with the rich and the famous and wasn’t really one of them. He was on the outside looking in.”