



Photos by Gideon Levin

Raoul Lionel Felder

when the honeymoon's over

by Aliza Davidovitz

It is not long after he walks into the posh, dimly lit New York restaurant that the whispering and elbow jabs begin. Patrons failing in their efforts at being discreet turn their heads to look. The maitre d' ushers over two complimentary drinks. Do they know him from TV? Do they know him personally? Or are they simply curious about a man whose mere presence commands attention.

Unlike most attorneys, when Raoul Lionel Felder enters a room, he does not need to open his mouth to make a bold statement. His regal comportment, his classy demeanor and his confident, savvy eyes amply convey that someone of preeminence has arrived. Lawyering skills aside, it is not for naught that this world famous advocate has been deemed the "King of Divorce."

"It ain't easy being king" (a line from the Mel Brooks epic *History of the World, Part II*) reads the needlepoint stitching on a throw pillow in his Madison Avenue office in Manhattan. It is an office which he calls the temple of broken dreams. Although he jokingly attributes his great success to a scintillating wit and sparkling personality, which he undoubtedly has, he gives more serious credit to the strong work ethic he inherited from his parents.

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Felder's hard work and strong sense of responsibility toward his clients leaves him little time to sleep or play. His is the tricky job of ensuring that his clients don't get screwed after the honeymoon is over. "In life we have happen to us that which we want to happen to us," Felder says. It is that philosophy that has placed him at the pinnacle of his profession. He's been named by the *National Law Journal* as one of America's most powerful lawyers. He has recently been appointed by New York Governor George Pataki to be one of 11 members of the State Commission on Judicial Conduct. "Be the best of whatever you do," Felder advises. "Life doesn't give prizes for second place." Being in first place, Felder charges \$500 an hour and retainer fees of up to \$20,000.

He must be doing something right because his client list reads like an X-rated who's who, that is to say, the ex-wife of Martin Scorsese, the ex-wife of Frank Gifford, the ex-Mrs. Mike Tyson, the ex-Mrs. Robin Leach, the ex-mistress of Mick Jagger, the ex-husband of Elizabeth Taylor, and the ex-Mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani. He also represented actor Richard Harris, Paloma Picasso's son, Claude, and billionaire real estate mogul Sol Goldman. His latest link in the chain of broken hearts is David Gest, soon to be Liza Minelli's ex-husband, just to drop name or two. But of the 350 divorce cases Felder handles a year, not all of the "ex-files" are household names. Sixty percent of his clients are women.

"In that chair across from my desk have sat movie stars, schoolteachers, two-bit chiselers, the famous, the almost famous, psychiatrists and cabdrivers, yesterday's news, Cabinet officers, gigolos, dykes and pansies, big time crooks, crooked and honest politicians, people with dreams and those with shattered dreams. The leather seat can't tell one ass from the other, and sometimes I have the

same difficulty," Felder once wrote in one of his many works of fiction. But if this depiction departs somewhat from reality, it is true in the sense that Raoul Felder has certainly heard and seen it all. He tells *Lifestyles* that after working for over 40 years as an attorney, he feels that human nature is essentially not good. "Human nature is basically bad or even evil," he goes on to say. "But nothing is unmixed in life and it is possible to appeal to the angels in our nature, rather than to the devils," although when it comes to winning trials Felder has appealed to the latter when he had to.

With an extremely high IQ and an acrobatic mind that is usually 12 steps ahead of his opponent, he foresees the solution long before his adversaries even understand the question. One of his more brazen tactics involved a client whose bridegroom insisted on her performing unnatural sex acts. Felder took the photo the wife had managed to take of such an episode with her husband and blew it up to a larger-than-life size. When opposing counsel saw the exhibit being introduced into evidence, he settled the case immediately and the heartbroken bride became a rich ex-wife. Such devilish deeds became less necessary when New York's divorce laws changed and a showing of fault was no longer required. In days gone by, when a spouse was caught cheating there would be some financial repercussions. However, when equitable distribution laws were implemented, adultery was rarely used as grounds for divorce since all assets accumulated during a marriage were to be distributed equitably.

A master of matrimonial law, Felder has written several books and legal articles on divorce, his most recent being *Bare Knuckle Negotiations* which will be published in 2004. He's been called by some the "hangman," for just when an adversary thinks he's found a loop hole, Felder

turns it into their noose.

Felder believes that there is a strong correlation between the high divorce rates and a society reared on TV. "Suddenly you had a generation that grew up thinking that if you didn't like something you just clicked it off," he once told a reporter. "There is a sense of impermanence and flux existing in a society whose metronome is the clicking of the remote control on TV sets, roaming from channel to channel," he says.

When asked whether adultery is perhaps a main cause of divorce in our promiscuous times, Felder says, "No." He explains that in fact very few divorce cases are motivated by adultery. "Adultery is a symptom, not a disease," he says. Felder suggests that most adulterers want to be caught, and, in a Jackie-Mason-like manner, questions how it is that brilliant businessmen who are wheeling and dealing, conniving and outfoxing the whole world, making billions a year, get found out by a yenta housewife who hasn't read a book in 10 years?

Regardless of TV's negative impact, it has turned Felder into a household name. He is constantly sought after by major news networks such as the Fox News Channel, CNN and other major media sources seeking his legal expertise. He also co-hosted his own talk show with Jackie Mason.

One controversial subject he is often asked about is whether couples should have pre-nuptial agreements. If there is anyone who wants to see things written in black and white it is the color-blind Felder. He says pre-nups are a must. He tells how some wedding plans never materialized because of the pre-nups. "You really find out who you're dealing with when the discussion of money and signing on the bottom line comes up." But to the starry-eyed romantics who suggest that some marriages last forever, Felder answers, "Well the thousand-year Reich

lasted only twelve years. So what's forever?"

Perhaps "forever" may never come, but in the meantime this matrimonial maven has himself been married to the same woman for over 40 years. They have two children together, a daughter, Rachel, who is a correspondent for *People* magazine, and a son, James who is also a writer. Felder's wife, Myrna Danenberg, was a Broadway dancer when they met. But his young bride soon took her last bow and decided to go to law school. Today she specializes in appellate law and works out of her husband's office.

Felder himself has made some pirouettes along his career path. As a young man, the over six foot tall Felder wanted to be a doctor and went to medical school in Switzerland. He soon had a change of heart and decided to return to the U.S. to study law at New York University. He was admitted to the Bar in 1959. He served as a federal prosecutor until 1963 in the Eastern District of New York. The nice Jewish boy from Williamsburg was taking on the Mafiosi and was hardly making a living. "I had been prosecuting criminals and felt they had a better future than the prosecutors," Felder says. "They were certainly making more money."

So Felder decided to go into matrimonial law. In those days it was a field with the least amount of competition. His first case came from his brother's partner. It earned him a \$5000 retainer, which was almost half his yearly salary as a prosecutor. His clever tactics also landed his name in the papers. He skillfully guided his client as to how to get a confession from his best man that he was having an affair with the bride. The friend admitted to it and the next day the New York headlines read, "Best man kisses and tells." His career began with a big splash and he hasn't stopped making waves ever since.

But long before Raoul Lionel Felder owned 500 suits, monogrammed shirts, \$800 slippers, a Rolls Royce and four houses, he was a poor skinny

Jewish boy from Brooklyn born to European immigrants. He remembers always being cold and shivering. His family was so poor that they had to use his bedroom as a dining room to host his bar mitzvah. He says that as a child he was studious, somewhat shy and always very curious. But he wryly describes that through the prism of his own memory he



Photos by Gideon Levin

was a muscular, blue-eyed blonde.

One thing Felder saw loud and clear were the hurdles his older brother, Jerome, who was crippled from polio, had to overcome. Despite his disabilities, Jerome persisted in his study of music and became a famous song writer known as Doc Pomus. He wrote such hits as, "Viva Las Vegas," "Little Sister;" "This Magic Moment," and "Save the Last Dance For Me," a song ironically written by someone who could not even dance. From his brother, Felder said that he learned "patience and the belief in your own ability, but also a profound sense of skepticism about everybody and everything else."

Despite his skepticism, Felder is a very positive person and highly humorous. When listening to the brilliant repartee between Felder and his good friend Jackie Mason, it becomes less clear who is the lawyer and

who is the comedian. His realm of knowledge is by no means limited to law. His discourse is continuously sprinkled with literary references and cultural anecdotes. He is charming, entertaining, profound, and engaging. When parting company from this one-of-a-kind man, you can't help but miss him even if you've just met him.

Felder is not only an avid reader, but also a superior writer, a fact that can be evinced both from his legal writings as well as his fictional novels. His writings reveal a man who is much more romantic and compassionate than the Raoul Felder of the court room that we all know. An example is an article he wrote for *Travel and Leisure* magazine: "The Ferry that cost a nickel when you were unspeakably and painfully young, your arm around a girl with long black hair that blew in the sea breeze, telling her poetry and lies...A close second is the Rainbow Room on a winter night when the city is spread out below like a diamond-studded carpet and the snowflakes float past like drifting flower petals while the band plays 'Sophisticated Lady'...making you think of a night 30 years ago on the Staten Island Ferry."

Felder is also a strong supporter of the State of Israel. In 1990, he was presented with the Defender of Jerusalem Award by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir. Felder believes that Israel's enemies have not changed their goals but merely their tactics. He feels they are still bent on the destruction of the Jewish State. He was never one to deny his Judaism and was well aware that even the biggest antisemites wanted a Jewish lawyer. Quoting Freud, he says "We are and remain Jews...the others will always simply exploit us and never understand or appreciate us."

When asked what place God has in his life, he edits the question and says, "The better question would be, 'What place do I have in God's life?'" lifestyles