

inside story

“Somehow I always knew life was a race – and that I had to win it”

Ed Victor, the UK's most famous literary agent, talks to Victoria Young about the story behind his extraordinary success

Ed Victor, 74, was born in New York and came to the UK in his early twenties, working as a publisher for Weidenfeld & Nicolson, Jonathan Cape and Alfred A Knopf before establishing his own literary agency in 1976. He now represents the cream of the literary world, and his clients include Nigella Lawson, Pamela Stephenson and Rupert Everett – among many others. He lives in London with his wife Carol, and they have a son, Ryan. Ed also has two sons from his first marriage.

My parents were immigrants. They came to America from Russia and met in an immigrants' club in New York in 1930, although they grew up within six blocks of each other in Odessa. They adopted their new country with a great passion, but one thing that was regretful to me is that they never taught me Russian.

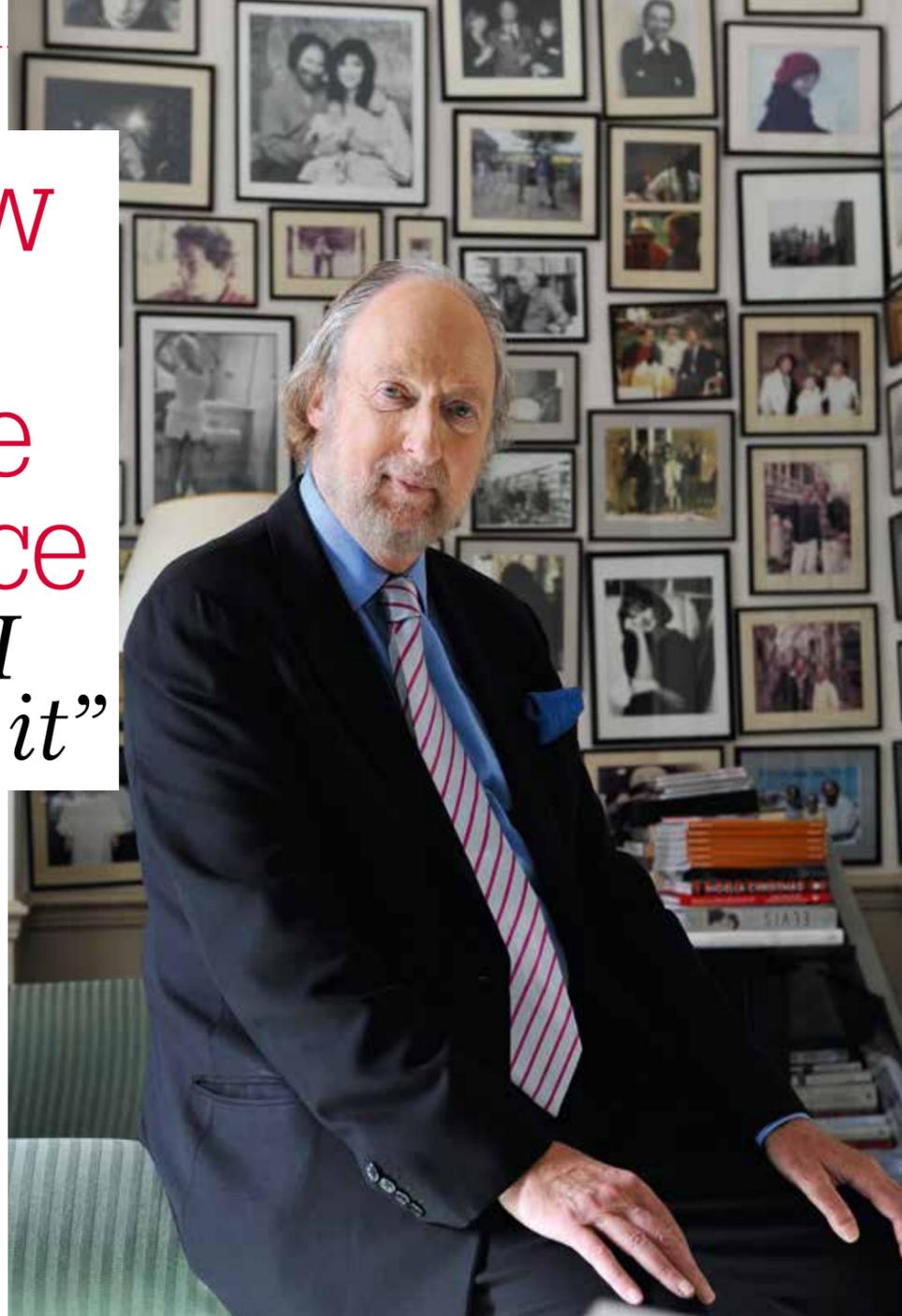
I was a Jewish prince, but without the money – we were not rich at all. But my parents worshipped their sons and they

always made me feel that life was full of possibilities for me. They were always very optimistic about my brother and me because they felt that we were born in a great country. As a result, I've always had the feeling that anything is possible.

I somehow always knew life was a race. And I always knew that I had to win it. And it's a long race; it's not a sprint, it's a marathon. I've watched many people who sprinted past me at the beginning fall by the side of the road. I still wake up every day feeling, “Let me get to work, what can I do today?”

People in the publishing business sometimes refer to me pejoratively as a “party boy”. I am very proud of that label. I have found an amazing amount of business at parties... and I've also had fun. Life is about fun, after all.

I first met Nigella Lawson at a party in Notting Hill Gate. I think it was at David Hockney's house. This very good-looking woman came up to me and said, “Are you Ed Victor?” and I replied, “Yes,” and then she said, “I'm Nigella Lawson, one day I'm going to be your client.” And I replied, “I bet you're right.”



Later, we got to know each other and became friends. I was friends with her late husband John Diamond. And then one day she said, “Look at these pages, I'm writing a cookbook called *How To Eat*.” I said the pages were wonderful. It's a classic book, and she's an absolutely brilliant woman.

When I first read a book I don't fake an orgasm. I'm very honest about what I feel. There are three criteria I have when deciding whether to work with someone. The first is: do I like the work and is the work good of its kind? My tastes are quite eclectic. I represent Jack Higgins and Freddie Forsyth on the one hand, and Alastair Campbell and Michael Portillo on the other. Politically, I swing either way.

The next is: do I like the person? Is this a person I want to know and get close to? Among the great joys of my life are the people that I represent. They're extraordinary people, and many of them become my friends. And many friends become clients. For example, Carol and I were friendly with Maurice Saatchi and Josephine Hart. One night in 1989, we went out for dinner, and Maurice said, “Josephine's writing a novel,” and Josephine added, “Oh hush, Maurice, don't bother him”, and I replied, “No – I'd love to see it.” That is how *Damage* came about.

The third one, I'm afraid, is: will it make money? Because I run a business that requires money to function. If all three criteria are present – I'm your man. Two of them will work just fine, as long as they're pretty strong. And if there's one of them in super abundance, I'm yours!

My job is to maximise not just the earnings but the reputation and the career of my clients. My role is also to encourage and to enable them – and empower them, not so much into realising their potential, but maximising their goals and making sure they get what they deserve. My job is also to light fires under other people and make them want my client's work, and make them want to do what is best for my clients. Sometimes,

Celebrity clients



Ed with Joan Collins...



...Mariella Frostrup...



...and Nigella Lawson

of course, they don't want to do that and I have to fight it. And I'm a good fighter but, believe me, I've come out on the losing end of negotiations, and that's life.

But largely I get what I want. I put that down to a number of things. First of all, I'm optimistic, and starting something by saying “I can do this” is a big help. I also know the publishing world very well, so I don't get caught out in technical details.

I tend to be busy most of the time, but it's by choice. About four days a week I devote around an hour to working out – twice a week with a trainer and twice a week on my own. I have a very active social life, which melds into my business life. I also like culture, and I like going to the opera, cinema and theatre.

I met Carol on 10 June 1972. A mutual friend fixed us up. I'd come to America from England in very bad shape – my first marriage had broken up and I was at the lowest ebb of my life. So I spoke to the mutual friend about meeting a woman. She said to Carol, “I want you to meet my friend Ed Victor,” and Carol replied, “I know him – he's boring and I don't want to go out with him.”

My friend was persistent. She asked me again to meet Carol as a favour to her and said to Carol, “I've heard a lot of reviews of Ed Victor but boring is not one of them.” And Carol

said, “He's a boring tax lawyer from LA.” She had the wrong Ed Victor. So after that we met, fell in love and we've been together ever since.

I never planned to be an agent. As a young publisher I was ambitious and successful but I never made much money. After a week or two of knowing each other, Carol and I decided to pool our income, quit our jobs and go travelling all over the world, which we did. And somewhere along the way I commented to Carol, “When we get back I want to make some money.”

We came back to London because I wanted to be with my sons. I went to see an agent I'd worked with called George Greenfield. He said, “Have you ever thought about being an agent?” And I replied, “Let me think about it.” A couple of days later I had lunch with legendary publisher Sonny Mehta, who was a friend. I mentioned George's offer and he said, “You might make a very good agent.”

Suddenly, a light went “bing”. So I wrote to George to say, “I want a job.”



Ed with his wife Carol

Part of my success is down to luck. I'm a big believer in the cliché that you can make your own luck, and I'm lucky that I love my job. I really enjoy having so many clients and it gives me endorphins! **w&h**

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