

## PUBLIC LIVES

## A Witness to the Revolution Recalls Abbie

By JAN HOFFMAN

THE young lawyer had just been fired from his first job for being a troublemaker — in 1968, preaching union to fellow Legal Aid lawyers was a no-no — when the stranger telephoned.

The caller was facing two criminal cases in Chicago, he said, and one from the Columbia student strike. "I have a doctor and a dentist," Abbie Hoffman, the antiwar leader and political stunt master, told Gerald B. Lefcourt, "but what I really need is a lawyer."

In those days, this is how they took meetings: Mr. Lefcourt, who didn't have an office, spent the night at Mr. Hoffman's St. Marks Place pad, talking, drinking, eating. Smoking? "Absolutely!" When the sun came up, Mr. Hoffman spelled out their pact: "If you keep me out of jail, I will make a revolution!"

Mr. Lefcourt gives a rueful, toothy smile. "I believed him."

Over the next 20 years and some 25 criminal cases, Mr. Lefcourt kept his famously irrepressible nonpaying client from serving significant time. And if the revolution is still on hold, Mr. Hoffman, a manic depressive who died at 52 in 1989, probably after committing suicide, did live to see the blossoming of the causes that animated him: registration of black voters, the end of the Vietnam War, protection of the environment.

The new film "Steal This Movie" tells how Mr. Hoffman was a fugitive for six years after being caught selling cocaine to undercover agents. Meanwhile, Mr. Lefcourt, who is portrayed by Kevin Pollak and who is the film's associate producer, moved into a comfortable office in the Upper East Side town house he owns.

"Abbie was the mentor, and I ended up as caretaker," he says.

With his summer-tennis/winter-ski perpetual tan and the floridly handsome features of a Victor Mature, Mr. Lefcourt hardly looks the part of the hand-to-mouth, Kunstleresque legal eagle he played in the years when his clients included Mark Rudd, the student leader, and members of the Black Panther Party. He was one of the Panther 21 lawyers at the signature 1970 radical chic fundraiser at the Leonard Bernsteins'.

Instead, he looks like someone who owns a house in Bridgehampton, who posed for that Paul Stuart winter coat ad ("It was for charity!") and is a frequent TV talking head. He is charming, funny, a good storyteller, smart and short: characteristics



Librado Romero/The New York Times

Gerald B. Lefcourt, the Kunstleresque legal eagle, in his Manhattan office.

that juries find endearing. Small wonder he has represented headline clients like Harry Helmsley and Mel Miller, the former Assembly speaker. One could also call him a drug lawyer — he defends clients caught shipping many tons of illegal substances (usually marijuana).

Press him and he will tell you not only that he believes marijuana should be decriminalized but also that somebody must defy the government when it conducts illegal searches.

THIS happens to be standard-issue talk for most defense lawyers with clients who pay cash — and Mr. Lefcourt lost a celebrated fight when the government compelled lawyers to name such clients. But Mr. Lefcourt, who can drop celebrity names as adroitly as the next high-profile lawyer, still walks the walk, after a fashion. In the last two decades, as he acquired paying clients, he was also a president of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers and testified in Washington about many noble, and usually losing, causes.

"And I enjoy making money; so what?" he smiles affably.

Some tales of Hoffman, please.

Mr. Lefcourt (his father, an optometrist, changed the name from Lefkowitz) rewinds to 1968. He is with Abbie on a plane to Chicago, having notified authorities that his client is returning to face charges (like obscenity: to deter photographers, Abbie once wrote a four-letter expletive across his forehead).

But agents swarm the plane, search Abbie, find a penknife. Two more cases: state and federal weap-

ons possession.

Long day at the police station. They're about to fly home, when two gentlemen in trench coats hand Abbie a subpoena from the House Un-American Activities Committee.

"That was my first day with my new client," says Mr. Lefcourt.

Exhilarating memories: Here is Mr. Lefcourt, drunk and singing in a Chicago jail cell with Bobby Seale, Jerry Rubin and the lawyer Michael Tigar, courtesy of Judge Julius Hoffman. It's a Friday night, and Bill Kunstler apologizes because he can't get a bail hearing till Monday. "Then he asks if he can borrow the keys to my New York apartment," Mr. Lefcourt says, chuckling.

Snapshot: Mr. Lefcourt embracing Abbie in 1980, as his friend surrenders, the moment for which Mr. Lefcourt worked exhaustively.

"You know when he made me angriest?" says Mr. Lefcourt, mournfully. "In 1984, when he attempted suicide. I saw him at Bellevue and I said, 'Abbie, what are you doing?'"

Mr. Lefcourt shakes his head. "He said, 'Aw c'mon, Gerry, you know I'll try anything once!'"

Mr. Lefcourt is now 57, a divorced father, a dignitary of the bar, who interviews candidates for New York's top court. In 1970, when he was 27 and in the middle of the Panther 21 trial, he told The New York Times: "Youth — that's what it's all about." He continued: "In three or four years we're going to turn the legal system upside down."

When shown the clipping, he grows silent. At last he says, "We were so wild then, such believers, and we had no cynicism." His smile is sad. "Now you can't trust anyone under 30."