

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MEMOIRS OF

MAURICE RENTNER

FROM VARYING PERSPECTIVES

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

INTERVIEW WITH

SELMA FRANKEL

Daughter of Maurice Rentner

DATE OF INTERVIEW

Tuesday, August 31, 1982

INTERVIEWED BY

Mildred Finger

Q: Mrs. Frankel, you were the elder daughter.

A: I was the elder daughter.

Q: Of Maurice Rentner.

A: Right.

Q: Right. And what we want to do today is get from you what you remember about the man, as a person, and, to the extent that you have any recollection of it, what his life was like in business. What I'm interested in knowing from you is anything that you care to talk about with regard to your father. So...

A: One thing I remember is a wonderful sense of humor. He loved to tell jokes, but he would get, shall I say, so engrossed in them that he'd start giggling before the punch line came, and you could hardly hear it because he was laughing so much at his own joke. I remember that he was very proud of this wonderful shock of grey...white hair. He was white at a very early age, and he had sparkling blue eyes, and he would always wear grey suits with a blue tie or blue suits with a grey tie, to coordinate with his hair. And he had a marvelous sense of color. He would combine colors that nobody ever saw in those days, that were absolutely beautiful.

Q: Colors for himself as a man, or...?

A: In his clothes, and in his designs.

Q: Could you give me some examples?

A: Oh, I remember a suit that I wish I had today. A spring suit, navy skirt with white blouse, and a cerise cummerbund, and a bright green jacket. And it was just so beautiful. And the color combinations, as I talk to you now, sound absolutely awful.

Q: No. It sounds very exciting.

A: It was. Very exciting.

Q: Can you think of another example?

A: Let me see....I think he was probably the first person I had seen combine grey and brown. But in such a way that they weren't drab. There would always be a third color to brighten things up. He was very innovative, not only in his...not only for his designs, but for men's things. I remember as a child everybody used to struggle with stiff bosom tuxedo shirts. Full dress shirts. He came back one year from France and he designed for himself a soft bosomed tuxedo shirt, which then became...They're still in fashion. People wear them. He also designed, for himself--These were basically for himself, and then Sulka's made the most of it--the soft tuxedo shirt, with the collar attached, that people wear now and have been wearing for umpteen years. After all, Daddy has been gone for a long time.

Q: Yes. Twenty-eight years I think it is.

A: Twenty-four years. Twenty-four years.

Q: In 1958. Right? Yes,

A: I remember because my first grandchild was born about 6 or 8 weeks before he died, and I can remember by her age,

Q: So did he...He saw her?

A: Hardly.

Q: Hardly,

A: Yes, But he was sick before she was born, and it made him very happy when...I had asked my children to...use whatever first name they wanted, but to use Rentner as the middle name. And I know he had a big smile

on his face. He had heard me, and understood me.

He also, in business, as a bet....A friend of his used to make very tailored suits. The Joan Crawford type of suit. And he said to his friend, "This is ridiculous. Why don't you make something a little more feminine?" And this friend said, "Oh, it wouldn't sell." And my father said, "I'll show you that it sells." And he designed....They're called costumes now....But he called them ensembles. Dresses and jackets; dresses and coats that would go together. That was the first time that ever came out.

Q: Let me make sure I understand. Your father was talking with a friend, who was making the stiff, tailored kind of suit...

Q: Actually it was George Jablow, who wound up being my sister's father-in-law. So he did it practically on a bet. You know, you don'tWell, you do see the tailored suits; they're coming back again. But you find the soft dresses, whether they be cocktail dresses or...with coats, or regular dresses with jackets, and that was his idea also. He also was the first one who came out with cotton dresses that were not sports dresses, made out of beautiful prints. Cocktail dresses. He would always pick up ideas. I've been particularly allergic to silk. I couldn't wear them. And I said, "For summertime, why don't you make a cotton dress. A beautiful print, dressy dress, with a jacket? Or a street dress," and so forth. Well, now they're all over the place. And this goes back even before I was married that he...Or shortly after I was married. And he designed those. So his ears and eyes and brain were always working. And if he saw something or heard something, he would put it at the back of his mind and sometime it would come out.

He was very meticulous about detail. And, as a matter of fact, in his designs, he would have the first model. Then he would have a duplicate, from which all the things were cut, And then he would also make a Size 14. He had a Size 14 model, where he would alter the dress slightly, to conform with the figure of a 14 and larger. So that it didn't look ridiculous. You couldn't cut an 8 and a 14 and a 16, and have it look exactly the same. It wouldn't fit properly. He also was the first one to come out with the waistband inside (I don't know if they use that now) so that everything wouldn't fall. It was always set in place.

Q: Waistband of a skirt....

A: Or a dress.

Q: Or a dress.

A: Yes. So that it would always fit properly. His skirts, whether it be a dress or a skirt, were made in such a way that women didn't look as if they had little pot bellies, as most of them do. He designed them in such a way that they had a slight fullness over the hip, to wear....It would lie flat over the stomach. It was great. I wish they would do it now. And, as I say, he has the title of the Dean of Fashion. And rightly so.

Q: Do you remember when he started his perfume business? Because it sounds as though it must have been very early for a manufacturer to do a perfume under his name.

A: He....I don't know exactly.

Q: I have the dates. I just wondered if you remembered why he became interested in perfume.

A: I don't know. But frankly I wish he hadn't.

Q: Why? What happened?

A: Because unless you do it...You can't come out with a big splash and let it die, You've got to keep pushing constantly.

Q: Yes, He did perfume from 1940 to 1952.

A: As long as that? I guess it carried its own weight. But you've got to keep adding. You can't use the same things. You've got to keep adding, whether it be perfume, toilet water, make...repackaging constantly, whether it be soap....Adding new colors to lipstick...And, I guess he didn't have time for that.

Q: Yes. It just seemed to me that there must be a story there. Because I don't know of any other manufacturer on Seventh Avenue who tried to do...

A: I think Nettie Rosenstein did.

Q: Did she?

A: I believe so.

Q: I'll have to check that out.

A: And I believe that people...Well, now they do do it as a completely separate business. But I don't think anyone who came out at that time who tried a perfume really did succeed, the way they do now. As I say, it's a completely different business.

Q: Right, And, of course, it was always said that it takes three years to make a perfume business successful, because a lot of money goes into it,

A: It does.

Q: And I believe Norell was perhaps the first.

A: Norell? No, I believe it was...

Q: Who made money.

A: Yes. But I think it was Nettie Rosenstein who came out with it, and it didn't last too long. I don't know how many years. But that sort of faded. And...

Q: What was he like as a father?

A: He was a good father. He loved his family. And every Friday night we would go there for dinner and there was always a family gathering. And not a dull gathering, you know, where just the family and... had nothing to talk about. There were always, oh, at least 12-14-16 people sitting down at the table. And we'd have lively conversations. And it was something to look forward to. You never knew who was coming. And even after Daddy died, Mother had the same thing.

Q: How about when you were growing up? Before you were married?

A: Well, I always remember people around. He loved people. He loved good times. He loved to dance. After he had a heart attack and could no longer play golf (he wasn't a very good golfer anyhow, but he enjoyed the game), he would dance. Anyplace he went on vacation, he would always take dancing lessons, because it was good exercise. So he and Mother were very fine dancers. I enjoyed dancing with him. He wasn't dancing a one-step or anything like that. And...

Q: Did he ever talk about his childhood himself? Or his young manhood?

A: No, I...One story I do remember is when he first...I don't remember for whom he worked at the time, but he was a salesman. It must have been early. He must have been about 15 or 16, and he was given a certain territory to sell. And, after all, who would pay attention to a youngster trying to come in and break into the sewing business? So one story I always loved was that he went up to Boston, and the two big stores in those days were Filenes and, I believe, Jordan Marsh. Well, he couldn't get to first base. So he wrote up two very nice orders, one for Jordan Marsh and one for Filene's, and sent them in the wrong envelopes on purpose. Of course, when the buyer for Jordan Marsh saw Filene's order, he wanted to know, "What's this new line?" I believe it must have been shirtwaists at the time. And vice versa.

Q: Before he started the firm, which I believe was called Gill and Rentner...

A: Yes. See, I don't remember the name.

Q: This is very early.

A: Very early. And when they each saw the order that the opposition was giving, they called him right up and each gave him a very nice order. Of course he apologized profusely for having put the order in the wrong envelope. But that was his start. And he came back with a very nice order from the two major stores in Boston. So, the mind was working, even at an early age. Very sharply. I don't remember Gill and Rentner at all. I...Somewhere, however, going through very old photographs, we came across one of the Gill and Rentner model, one of these figures...where he's draping something on her.

Q: He knew how to drape, your father did?

A: He knew. Yeah, He couldn't put a pin in. If he used a pair of scissors, he would probably cut himself. But he would hold the thing up and say, "It should go like this," or "it should go like this," or "this is wrong," or...And he would sit there while it was corrected. Until it suited him.

Q: So that he really had no training that you know of.

A: No. He just had a very good eye.

Q: For a short time he apparently was in business with his brother. That was in 1912. I think that was called M & H Rentner?

A: Correct. Yes.

Q: But that lasted, I gather, a very short time.

A: That lasted for some time, I believe. But then they were in business again, even after I was married, and it was called Maurice Rentner, Harry Rentner. Those were the two names. On the door. And that I don't believe lasted too long.

Q: According to my notes, the firm of Maurice Rentner, Inc., was founded in 1923. Does that sound right to you?

A: That could be. After all, I'm not that young, but I'm not that old to where I can...So that...that would have been after M & H Rentner was dissolved. And I believe that was in the Waldorf building.

Q: That I don't know, Where was the Waldorf building?

A: Well, the Waldorf Hotel was on Fifth Avenue, I believe, between either 31st and 32nd or...No, no. Thirty-third and thirty-fourth, where the Empire State is. And his building...The building he was in, was

right across the street.

Q: It is interesting. Of course, the market had been moving uptown.

A: He was also very instrumental in starting the garment district, actually. He had...Oh, what should I say? I think he was one of the idea men of 498 Seventh Avenue, which became the first building, the garment building. Then 500 7th Avenue came on, and then it had spread to both sides of the street.

Q: Right. Right. And then, of course, it was often the practice in those days to use somebody like your father as the focal point of the building, and then to attract other people, because he was there.

A: Probably.

Q: Yes. So, he went into 498 when you were just really aware of the business.

A: No. I was aware of it in the Waldorf building.

Q: Which was at 33rd and Fifth?

A: Thirty-third, between Fifth and Sixth, which was just opposite the Waldorf. And then he also started the Fashion Originators' Guild, to copyright original designs because they were being copied for nothing in no time at all. And that was a successful idea, I mean, it protected the better firms from being copied. But then there was a lawsuit about that. Restraint of trade.

Q: The FTC,...And then it was thrown out by the Supreme Court in 1941.

A: Right.

Q: Do you...Your father and his family were also very much involved in the industry. Do you have any knowledge of how or what their relationship might have been? For example, his sister, Anna Miller, was in the business.

A: Right.

Q: And the Siegenfelds were also related to you in some way.

A: Well.-,The oldest Siegenfeld, Herman, worked for my father. He was in the showroom.

Q: He was not related?

A: Yes. He was a nephew. And I believe one of the other brothers may have worked for Anna Miller, who was a sister, who had a more moderately priced line. Her things were not as expensive as my father's. And then there was Ira Miller, who made very beautiful things for the small person. Sophisticated clothes, Because his sister was a "petite," what is known as a "petite" now. And my daughter was a "petite." And it was very difficult to find sophisticated clothes for that, which is what Ira made.

Q: Was Ira a step-brother or a half-brother?

A: Well, I don't know how you call it...What you would call it. They had the same father.

Q: Okay. He was a half-brother.

A: But we never considered that. He was always considered a brother.

Q: And were they close at all?

A: Yes, they were close. As a matter of fact, to this day, Ira's still alive. And there isn't a family function that we don't include him. And

he is very considerate of us all. A lovely person. A very nice person. Very active for his age. I mean, Ira's in his eighties. I know...

Q: Yes, I'm seeing him this afternoon. I haven't seen him in a long time.

A: He goes to the Athletic Club. Does exercises; swims. Loves music and opera. And he lives right across the street from Lincoln Center. Takes courses down at the New School every year. And will not let his mind go sterile.

Q: Was your father interested in music and art?

A: He loved music. And loved art. I used to paint and he would come up and criticize, and say, "It needs a little more of this, and a little more of that." He bought some of my things, which he gave away to various people whom he liked. And whenever we sat down to dinner, he would have a stack of records which he put on. In those days, they called them victrolas. And lovely soft music...And he always said he'd love to go to P.A.T. who,...I think it was "P.A.T.," and make out a schedule for them, music that would go together. Dinner music one night, music...or whatever...

Q: I don't know what "P.A.T." is. Is it like Musak?

A: P.A.T. (WPAT) is a Jersey station. They give you commercials, I think, every 15 minutes. It's 92.3, AM & FM. And he loved art. And he loved porcelains.

Q: Did he collect?

A: Yes. I have a good bit of it now. Every year when he came back from Europe, it was always, "What did he bring back this time?" What did he bring back next time. I know, after Mother died, and we broke up her home,

I took a lot of the porcelains. And now my children have most of them, because living in Florida as I do, it's a completely different type of living, and the home didn't lend itself to that, so I divided it up and gave each child some of it. And he loved good looking women. Smart looking women. Not necessarily beautiful, but well put together. And, as a matter of fact, when he had his heart attack, the doctors had an awful time with him, because he kept raging and ranting. "Nurses at the age of 35 should retire," he said. "I've got a night nurse now that reminds me of Lady Macbeth. She comes along with a cape in the middle of the night and a flashlight and wants to see if I'm asleep. If I'm asleep, the flashlight in my eyes will wake me up!" So the doctor said, "I'm sorry, but Flo Ziegfeld is dead. And I can't go and ask him for some of his beauties." But he was always like that.

Q: Did you ever go to Europe with him on a business trip?

A: No, No, I was too young for that. But we were in Europe. The first or second time I was in Europe, he sent a cable to go to a certain place and certain stores and pick out certain clothes that he didn't have; that he didn't take with him, and it suddenly dawned on me that he wanted those models--and they were fitted on me. I think that made me hate anything to do with...I hate fittings...And I had these things and I had to be fitted and refitted, So it wound up, I took most of them in my trousseau, of all the various evening clothes, It was worthwhile, yes. But it gave him the ideas that he wanted. Plus he improved on so many of them. I mean, he gave them his own touches.

Q: Right, He was going to Europe then, to see the couture, before the Second World War, So he was going really very...Between the two

World Wars.

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: Have you any idea how many business trips he made like that?

A: He used to make two a year. And then, as time went on, he would just go once a year, and he would send his designers to go there. His designers never had full rein, because he always had to okay everything himself, and make changes if he did not approve of everything. And so his designers learned a great deal from him.

Q: Yes. He was one of what is more and more a rare breed. A manufacturer who really understood styling.

A: Well, if he were alive today...Well, of course, nowadays designers have a completely different...What should I say...A completely different feel. In those days, it was the "rag" business, and it wasn't considered too much. Nowadays, when they have all the French names, they're considered very social people, accepted all over. One thing I remember about that is, he never mixed business at home. His friends were not in the trade, shall I say. He had a few--very few. His home was always something...He left his business behind. And, in those days, even though he had the tag on the back of a jacket, they were always taken off in the stores. Nobody knew who made what. I don't remember who was the first person who put the name on the lining of a jacket, I think it would have been Dior or St. Laurent or somebody like that, to where the name could be...I remember seeing it in the store, and you opened it up and the silk lining was white on white, but you could see who was the designer,

Q: The first one I know of was Dave Zelinka.

A: Who?

Q: Dave Zelinka. He was a coat manufacturer. But he had his fabrics made in China, and he had his name put in.

A: Well, that must have been much later. Much later. Did the encyclopedia give you anything about the Fashion Originators' Guild?

Q: Yes. I have also got a very large note on it. When it started, when it was over. What it attempted to accomplish. The fact that he was the first and only President, actually. So I do have...

A: The Fashion Originators' Guild was his idea. And he... There was just one shop in each city that could belong to it. He would approach the person that he wanted, or the shop that he wanted.....

Q: That I hadn't heard. I thought it was a manufacturer's association.

A: No, no. Fashion Originators' Guild...No....Quality Street. That's what I was talking about.

Q: Oh. Okay. Quality Street was what?

A: Was a magazine that was put out...That he put out...

Q: That I had heard of.

A: Yeah. And twice a year, or perhaps three times a year, one shop in each city would get it, along with the designs.

Q: When you say magazine, was it really a printed magazine?

A: For the shop. And it described...It had a photograph of each dress. And it described the dress, as well as its being in the shop,

And he'd have an editorial about what the coming season would be.

Q: That sounds like a very early sales promotion piece. I'd never heard of anyone else doing.....

A: Probably. That's the only time I've ever seen it.

Q: Yes, Right, So that he would produce, for the benefit of however many customers he selected, a....

A: It was a separate line of dresses that he would select... Dresses, suits, whatever. Evening dresses...Maybe a dozen dresses. Maybe a few more, I'm not sure. And they had to buy this whole collection. And this was confined to the store, for a certain length of time, I believe. And then maybe later on it could be sold to everybody else.

Q: Did he provide the stores with enough of them to send to customers? To their customers? Or was it principally a mailing piece to interest the stores themselves?

A: I don't know.....

Q: It's very interesting.

A:how many he did, I don't know. Bernice may have an old copy of Quality Street.

Q: She didn't...has not mentioned it. But I'm going to see her again. And perhaps Ira Rentner knows something more about it.

A: Ira would know much more about it.

Q: But that's really interesting. I've never heard it before.

A: And it was very successful. He had, I should say, about a dozen suits or dresses, or a combination of....A little bit of every part of the line. And it was confined...I know...I'm not sure...I think it was....

Was it Stewart & Company?

Q: Stewart & Company, in Manhattan. Sure. Mildred Klare was probably the buyer at that time, Right?

A: Right. And she was the one who got that. And...

Q: Mildred, whom I've seen, never mentioned it.

A: No? She probably didn't remember it.

Q: Yes. Exactly.

A: The windows would be featured, with the magazine open and ...You know, various pages. And the editorials were always very interesting. As a matter of fact...Bernice must have a copy of it, someplace, because that's where we found a legible signature for him in that encyclopedia.

Q: Oh, that is very interesting.

A: Because we were going out of our minds trying to find a legible signature.

Q: And they wanted one...

A: Well, under his photograph, a signature.

Q: Right. Right. Quality Street. Very good, As I said, I really haven't heard about it from anybody, and I've now seen, what? Five people.

A: Well, I don't think they would remember that, And I don't know...When you see Paula Neiman, if she was even working for him at that time.

Q: Well, when I see Lillian Sloan, she might remember it. Although it doesn't sound as if she had it.

A: No, she didn't have it.

Q: Well, I'll call Mildred and ask her about it.

A: And when you see Lil Sloan, you'll find that...After all, she's about 92 now.

Q: She's 94.

A: Ninety-four? As a matter of fact, she called me...She called Bernice, and I happened to answer the phone when I was there. And she said, "I got a very peculiar call from a Mildred Finger." I said, "She wants to interview you."

Q: And Maurice Rentner was also....

A: He was also a guide and a mentor to so many people throughout the country. Because I remember, after he left us, the letters that we got. "If it wasn't for Maurice, we wouldn't be in business."

Q: Do you remember any of the people who wrote those letters? Do you remember any....?

A: No, I don't remember the names. For years I kept them, and then they became such a collection, and everybody used to come to him for guidance. And I don't know if Martha Phillips will tell you, but I happened to have been in Palm Beach at the time when she came up to Daddy, and she said, "Maurice, I would like to open a shop in Palm Beach, Do you think I'm ready for it?" At the time she was in the Jensen building, upstairs. And he said, "Yes, I think you are." She said, "Well, I think I have a place picked out, on Worth Avenue, and I'd like you to see it." And I happened to be down there at the time. She went over to Worth Avenue and picked out the shop, and my father said to her, "You should have the one next door to it." And that's where she is still. And this goes back a very long time.

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE
FASHION INDUSTRIES

Transcripts housed in Special Collections:

1. No photocopying without written permission from the oral author or his designee. The Director of the Library will furnish addresses; the reader must write for permissions.
2. Written permission is needed to cite or quote from a transcript for publication. The user must send the Library Director the pertinent pages of final draft; the Director will assist in obtaining the final permission. The form of citation normally used is: "The Reminiscences of _____, (dates), pages _____, in the Oral History Collection of The Fashion Institute of Technology."
No fees will be charged for published use.
User is asked to furnish Oral History Program with a copy of the published work.
3. In order to see PERMISSION REQUIRED or CLOSED memoirs, the reader must obtain the written permission of the oral author or his designee. Contact the Library Director for addresses. The reader writes for permissions. Written permission if obtained must be presented when the reader visits.