

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MEMOIRS OF

MAURICE RENTNER

FROM VARYING PERSPECTIVES

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

INTERVIEW WITH

LILLIAN SLOAN

Former Shop Owner

DATE OF INTERVIEW

Wednesday, September 1, 1982

INTERVIEWED BY

MILDRED FINGER

Q: Miss Sloan, would you tell us when you first met Maurice Rentner, and what the circumstances were?

A: Well, I was married at the time. I was designing for several different organizations.

Q: You had been a designer before you were married?

A: As I remember, my husband was going up in an elevator to interview somebody who was known as a pretty good designer for a job, for himself and for me. And, as I recall, when he was going upstairs, Maurice Rentner was in the elevator. He knew him pretty well. Not very well, but by reputation. He was an excellent salesman and everybody knew him.

Q: Do you remember if this was when Mr. Rentner was in the Waldorf building or...

A: No, he was on 33rd Street.

Q: Thirty-third street.

A: Uh huh. And at the time, his brother was with him too.

Q: Harry.

A: And Maurice Rentner.

Q: Right.

A: So, when Maurice met him in the elevator this day, he said, "What are you doing here?" And my husband said, "Well, I'm having an interview with somebody." Maurice Rentner asked questions about who and what, and he said, "Before you interview anybody else, or make any arrangements, will you come down and talk to me?"

Well, I was pretty well known in those days, not so much as a designer, but...I guess I was pretty well known as a designer.

Q: Were you a sketcher?

A: I never did anything except go into a room that was a designer's room, and I never did anything about cutting or draping. I knew nothing about it. But I would be there and tell them how it should be done and how I thought it should be, and it worked out very well. Well, at that time, Maurice was selling...I believe I'm right; I may be wrong on a few of these things...clothes for \$16.75. That was the one price that everything was. And he said he'd like to see me. He'd heard about me. So, we arranged some way, somehow. He was a short man and not very prepossessing looking. I went to the showroom, and when he came toward me, I thought, "Oh, this funny little man." Anyway, I'll make it as short as possible. It was arranged that my husband and I open a separate department, and it was called "The Lillian Sloan-Rentner," or something. I really forget that. He had a very good showroom at the time. He arranged that I would come with them and design. But I said I couldn't design \$16.75 clothes. I never knew anything like that. Well, after a little conversation, he said, "Well, what would you be interested in designing?" So I said, "At least, to start at \$29.75; something like that." I may not be correct on all of this at all. So..

Q: You're pretty close.

A: Well, anyway...

Q: Just tell me, briefly, what kind of people had you been designing for or working for before?

A: Well, in the first place, my husband had been with his father and his brother in the dress business, and my husband...

Q: What was his name?

A: His name was Joe Solomon, Joseph Solomon, When Maurice

Rentner heard that I was going to design \$29-\$39-\$50 dresses, he couldn't understand it. He was selling at \$16.75. One price. So then I started, and he began to see what I was doing. He used to come into the room--the designer's room--and be very interested. Of course, he couldn't believe we could ever sell them. Well, as it happened, it was a great success. He only...But, of course, part of that success, also, was that my husband was a wonderful salesman and knew some of the buyers very well, and had entree to so many stores.

Q: About what year did all this happen, approximately?

A: I wish I could tell you.

Q: I know that Maurice Rentner....I know about when he moved up to 498...So, clearly, this was before this, and this had to be in the '20s, I would think.

A: Possibly. Yes....Unfortunately, my husband was an excellent salesman, but there were other problems. We left Maurice. My husband and I separated. When he heard that I had separated, Maurice called me immediately and asked me if I would see him and discuss going back into business with him. Not with him, because he had a big business by that time... Well, I said No, I couldn't. I had already made other plans.

Q: I would like to go now to when you opened your shop, which, I assume, would have been the time that you would make your next contact with Mr. Rentner.

A: Yes, I guess so.

Q: Because now you had become a buyer of merchandise.

A: Uh huh. And he was really wonderful.

Q: When did you decide to open your shop?

A: I wish I could remember all these things. I had a small shop on Madison Avenue between 56th and 57th. And I did very nicely there. But it wasn't large enough.

Q: You had that little shop on Madison.

A: There was a real estate man who used to come in every so often because I knew I didn't have enough room in this shop. It was getting way beyond me. So I had talked to him several times. He comes in one day, all excited, and said, "Look. I have a place that I think would be wonderful for you." And he tells me 57th Street and Park Avenue. So I said, "Well, that's a very big place, and it would cost so much to redo it." So he said, "Well, I'm sure it could be done. And the neighborhood would be great." I'll make it short. I took the shop. I believe either Mrs. Rentner or Maurice or somebody heard that I was taking this shop, and Maurice was the kind of man--a lovely man in every way--but he wanted to boss everything. And he hadn't heard about this, and he was quite concerned about it. About why I would do such a thing without asking him.

Anyhow, I took the shop. I made a wonderful deal with the man who owned it. The mistake I made is I took a five year lease and an option on five more years. At that time I think I could have gotten 50 years. Because it had been an automobile showroom and Park Avenue was not so exciting in those days. Well, anyway, I took the shop and it did very, very well.

Q: Now, I assume at that point you began to buy from many

resources, including Maurice Rentner,

A: Yes, definitely.

Q: So now you had a different relationship to him from the one that you had before. It would be interesting to know how it was to deal with Maurice Rentner. Did you go to showings? Did he show you the clothes privately? How did it work?

A: In his own...

Q: Showroom. When you were dealing with him for your store.

A: Yes.

Q: You bought his clothes.

A: Sure.

Q: Did you go in and see a showing of models, the way the showings are done today?

A: Yes, certainly. But a lot of other people did too.

Q: Right.

A: From out of town and from all over.

Q: Right, exactly.

A: All the larger stores and they all came. We were invited to these showings.

Q: And how many...Do you remember how many there were a year?

A: Well, I could be sure of two; winter and summer. Now...

You want to know more about the man, don't you?

Q: I want to know how a buyer felt. I mean, thinking of yourself as a buyer and store owner, was he helpful to you? What...How did he feel about buyers? Did he encourage you to help with the collection in any way?

A: No.

Q: He was, I gather, always very proper in his dealings about deliveries and so forth.

A: Yes. That's true.

Q: What do you know about him in the days of the Fashion Originators' Guild? Were you aware of what was happening there?

A: The way Maurice ran it?

Q: Yes. Yes. For example, I have heard that he was a very dictatorial kind of person.

A: He was that.

Q: Okay.

A: No question about it. Because he was always a man who thought that what he said was right, and he didn't want anybody else to take anything away from what he thought he was doing.

Q: When you were buying from him for your shop, did he have any minimums that he insisted upon your buying? He didn't say, "You must buy half a dozen," or anything of that sort?

A: No.

Q: Did you ever participate in the catalogue called "Quality Street"? That was not something that was part of your business?

A: No.

Q: Because I understand he did a catalogue. He arranged to have a catalogue made of his collection, or parts of his collection, and some stores in the country had...

A: I imagine out of town places, He probably sent this and they ordered from that, or something. That's only my imagination. I'm not sure.

Q: You don't know about that.

A: No. I don't really. I know you want to know more about him.

Q: Anything you can think of. For example, I had heard that he had Friday night dinners in his home.

A: Yes.

Q: Was that something that he...Were store people ever invited to those dinners?

A: There may be a few, but not very many. I was invited, I went and I became very friendly with them. And...I go crazy with this memory of mine...But..I'm 98 years old.

Q: Are you really?

A: Yes, I am. So I have to make excuses,

Q: You're fantastic,

A: So...What were we saying? Something about...

Q: About Friday night dinners.

A: I was always invited there.

Q: Because you were friendly with them.

A: Oh, yes. Very friendly. And he and his brother did not get along at all, They separated. First it was, I guess, Harry and Maurice Rentner.

Q: Yes. Harry Rentner, I think, is the name.

A: Well, I used to be there very often, on Friday nights, and

he changed a great deal.

Q: Did he?

A: He...When I first knew him, then he used to read a great deal and read very interesting books. Never played cards or anything like that. Suddenly he stopped reading, and used to play cards a great deal.

Q: Do you have any idea why?

A: Oh, I think he just met a few men and..He loved having company in his home and I guess, at that time, he would invited some of these men--maybe they were business acquaintances (I really don't know that), and they used to play cards.

Q: I understand he liked music very much, and he collected some art.

A: Art, yes. Music, I don't know. But I do know one thing that impressed me at the time, They had a beautiful apartment, which was a co-op and duplex on, I think it was 60 some odd street and Fifth Avenue. And I recall they had, oh, tremendously big rooms. And by this time he had made a great success. Because...I'll go back to something you asked me earlier. When I first met Mr. and Mrs. Rentner, that goes back...

Q: Please tell me, yes. I'd like to know when you first met them.

A: It was when we had made an arrangement that we were coming, my husband and I, to put in a separate department for him in his showroom. I remember the first time we ever went to visit them, He invited my husband and myself to come up one evening. He asked us to come up one evening

to dinner. And they lived at 157th or thereabouts...

Q: It sounds as if it was in Washington Heights.

A: Well, maybe. I'm not sure. I know it was 150-some odd street. He and my husband talked a great deal about business and so on, and I remember Mrs. Rentner turning to me and saying, "Well, what do you do with your spare time." See, I was not doing anything then. I wasn't designing. I wasn't buying. I wasn't doing anything. And I said, "Oh, I have plenty to keep me busy." But we were invited there and we got there around 8:15. But Maurice was not home yet, for dinner, because...I didn't mean anything to him, how late he was or how...If anybody was coming, how it would affect them. Anyway, when he got there, we had been there quite some time. And I remember when we left, I said to my husband, "Don't ever make any dates like that for me," because I was completely lost.

Q: The fact that he became interested in art; the fact that he was really a perfectionist in clothes, and so on, was perhaps a way of improving himself?

A: Absolutely. And when you asked about...I started to tell you and then I forgot. They had a beautiful apartment, and in their living room they had a mantle piece that was filled with crockery and stuff. Nothing much. And the first time he went to Europe, he brought home the most beautiful antiques and worth a great deal. And he had everything taken away from the mantle and had all these things put up. He was always trying to better himself.

Q: Well, that's wonderful.

A: Yeah. And, as I said, he read a great deal. Their whole apartment and everything, he was responsible for. He had excellent taste.

Wonderful taste. And then the men used to come up there, every Friday, and the family...The family, for dinner, mainly, and the other friends would come in, and he started to play cards. And he enjoyed playing cards very much. That was..Oh, I don't know, how long ago. A very long time ago.

Q: Yes. Right. He also did make many trips to Europe, did he not?

A: Quite a few, yes. And then he put a lot of money into a store on 5th Avenue, that he thought would be a wonderful thing--he and somebody else--but whatever happened, it never really amounted to...And they closed it up quickly. But he didn't need it. I mean, by this time...

Q: As I understand it, from his brother, he was very successful in his own business, but his investments were usually not very successful.

A: Well, that I don't know.

Q: But like this investment that you're describing, in the store...

A: Well, I remember when the break came..You know, downtown... I was in the showroom, and he was sitting at his desk, and he had piles of all different...I don't know what it was or anything. So he called me and he said, "Come here, Lil, I want to show you something." And I thought, "Oh, my God, what is he going to say? What's happened?" I knew what was happening. We were going through this terrible period. And these were all stocks and bonds that he had kept for I don't know how many years, and never used. Never did anything. And this particular day, he took out many things...I guess he had to. In fact, we all had a mutual friend, and he was practically wiped out.

Q: This was at the time of the crash, in the late '20s.

A: Yes. And I know that Maurice helped him a great deal, to get out of this mess. So...

Q: He apparently did have a personal tradition of helping people. It sounds that way.

A: Oh, yes. I think if anybody needed him, or anything, he would...But if he disliked you, that was...You couldn't say anything or do anything to make him feel differently, about people he didn't think were right. And the great, one thing in his makeup was when he thought people were saying he was a Russian Jew...That was terrible, because he felt that the German Jews looked down on the Russian Jews. So, I don't know, I guess I could tell you so much more. But really, my memory,...And at this point... is not very good...

Q: You've done very well. You've told me some things I've never heard before. I think that's really very good. Thank you. I don't want to wear you out.

You were saying that he remembered and observed...

A: Everything. And as I've said before that I...We went up to see him at 150-some odd street. Well, I invited them. Because I felt...I think we had made some negotiations with them. And I usually ran a very nice household. And when they came, I told them what time to come, because that... In those days, you couldn't keep help very late. And they came...And I could see... I guess I had an entree...It was a very nice meal...And I could see that he was looking so...looking at the china and looking at everything. He was so

impressed. He always wanted to have everything just so.

Q: That was interesting. So, when he was able to...as you say ...When he made his first trip to Europe, and bought a lot of things, he got rid of what he knew was not really.....

A: I remember that first trip very well. And he bought her-- Dorothy--the most gorgeous ring. A diamond. I know there were two pieces of jewelry. They could bring them in at that time without mentioning it. But I remember, he bought her two gorgeous pieces of jewelry. That was the first trip he made. And they lived between 72nd and 73rd...Later, they lived on 69th Street. And they had a magnificent duplex and terrace apartment. In fact, he died while they still had the apartment.

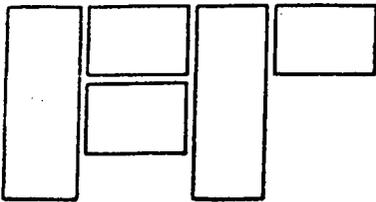
Q: He died in 1958, Yes. That I know is the date. And I would assume that you probably closed up somewhere at the end of the '40s?

A: Possibly. You see, I married again, too...

Q: Uh huh, Right, I see...

A: And my life changed a great deal.

Q: It's not important. I was just trying to establish the fact that you really knew him just about until his death.



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