

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MEMOIRS OF

MAURICE RENTNER

FROM VARYING PERSPECTIVES

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

INTERVIEW WITH

MILDRED KLARE

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INTERVIEWED BY

Mildred Finger

Q: Mildred, I would love to hear from you about the beginnings of your career, and the time you met Maurice Rentner, and what you know about him from that point on.

A: I met Maurice Rentner in 1917. Isaac Lieberman, who took me around to the different houses, introduced me to the people. He showed me how to write an order, even, and...

Q: What was the story about Isaac Lieberman?

A: Isaac Lieberman was then with Stewart & Company.

Q: Stewart & Company.

A: It was at 37th Street and Fifth Avenue. It was a fabulous dress business. The place he took me first was M & H Rentner, at that time, and they were in a building on 34th Street, Oppenheim Collins were downstairs in that building, on 34th Street.

Q: That's East of Sixth Avenue?

A: East of Broadway. And it was in that building. And I remember as if it was yesterday. It was Maurice and Harry Rentner; M & H Rentner.

Q: Now, this was about 1920 or...

A: It was 1917-18-19-20, Maurice and Harry Rentner. And I remember every booth had canaries in cages. When you came into the showroom, all the birds were singing. I remember that distinctly because I had never been around showrooms. I didn't know anything about it, you know. He thought I was a smart girl, and Maurice was very nice to me. He knew I was a novice and after that, when I came in, he used to help me.

Q: What did he look like?

A: He was a short, very natty person. He dressed...He was meticulously smart in his clothes. You know, everything had to be just so. And he was very neat. Very, very...And he knew style. When he'd see a woman well dressed, he'd stop and look at her. When 498 Seventh Avenue was built, Maurice Rentner moved to 498 Seventh Avenue. He was one of the first tenants there. And he split with Harry, and it was just Maurice Rentner.

Q: What was his price range?

A: Hummm?

Q: What was his price range?

A: His price range at that time was \$29-\$39-\$49, wholesale, \$59...It was around then...

Q: He made suits.

A: He was the first one to make the little tailored suit with an easy waistline. Nobody made it. In those times they just had the plain striped tailored suit. He was the first one who made that little easy waistline in his suit. He was very clever. And he was always looking for smart people in his designers' room. He was not a real designer himself, but he knew clothes, and he'd be in the designer's room all the time, and he worked with them. And he knew a good designer when he saw one, and he knew nice clothes. He was a smart man. He was in the showroom.

Q: Who were some of the designers who worked for him?

A: Well...None of them became business people. So I can't mention them, except for Bill Blass. When Anna Miller gave up her business...

Q: Anna Miller was his sister.

A: See, Anna Miller went into business, Bill Blass was in Maurice Rentner's sample room. And he thought...Anna needed a designer, so he thought it would be a good idea, and he told her he had this very smart boy he thought she could do something with, so Bill Blass went to Anna Miller. And he was with Anna Miller quite a time. When Anna Miller gave up her business, he went back to Maurice Rentner. When Maurice Rentner died...

Q: Do you remember what year Maurice Rentner died?

A: Well, I don't know. Let me see. The fact is, I was in Europe, and somebody told me on the boat, that Maurice Rentner had died. So I really don't know. He left the business to his wife, and the wife sold it to Phil and Lewin. Do you remember Lewin?

Q: Gene Lewin. Yes, indeed.

A: Gene Lewin.

Q: And to Herman Siegenfeld, actually.

A: Herman and Lewin. They both passed away. Yes. And Bill was the designer. Bill bought a piece of the business. And then he seemed to buy them all out and he stayed, and the firm became Bill Blass.

Q: Could you go back to the days when Maurice Rentner founded the Fashion Originators' Guild, because that's a very interesting story.

A: There was an organization of anyone...Couldn't buy copies, you see. He was the person, though. Yes. Yes.

Q: And how did it work? How did it affect you, as a buyer?

A: Oh, it didn't affect me at all. I wasn't in for copies, because at that time I had the Little Shop at Macy's and Bamberger's. So I didn't have to buy the copies.

Q: Who did buy them?

A: But not knowingly, of course. And he did very well with it. But he had a dictatorial way about himself, Other manufacturers didn't get along with him.

Q: With Maurice Rentner.

A: At the meetings, they didn't get along, because they felt that he ordered everybody around. He was the kind that took over. You know what I mean?

Q: Uh huh.

A: He was very smart. A very, very clever person.

Q: Did you ever...I know you made trips to Europe on business. Were you ever there at the same time he was?

A: Oh, yes, We were over there at the same time. At the openings, everybody was over there at the same time.

Q: This was before the SEcond World War?

A: I used to go to Europe twice a year from 1920 on.

Q: Really? And in those days, did stores bring back merchandise to copy, or was it the manufacturers?

A: I used to bring back the models and we had them copied here. Vionnet, with fagotted seams; coats from Paquin. Anything that was gorgeous.

Q: And did Maurice Rentner buy...?

A: Oh, yes, I remember he used to buy his laces and his materials in Europe.

A: What part of Europe? In France or Italy or...?

A: Mostly in France. He used to buy his silks, his prints, and some of them he had copied here. Prints, you know. He used to buy his laces, lace collars and cuffs. He used to buy it over there.

Q: Do you have any idea how old he was when he founded the business? Or when he and his brother went into business?

A: No, I didn't know him before he...He was already in business when I,...So I wouldn't know. He was married, and I think he was having his third child soon after that. I only met him when I started to buy.

Q: In those days, there was a very close relationship with key buyers, was there not? Not like today, when everything is computer.

A: The buyers relied on the manufacturers a little bit more than they do today. Today it's a different ballgame.

Q: For instance, when you went to Maurice Rentner to see the collection, was it shown on models? Is that how it was done then?

A: Oh, yes. The fact is, I used to see his collection sometimes before he even showed it, because he wanted my opinion.

Q: He obviously thought you had pretty good taste. So you saw the collections...

A: Oh, I saw the collections--many of them before they were shown. And if I thought some things were not nice, I would tell him the truth. But he had beautiful shows.

Q: He did?

A: He had beautiful clothes.

Q: Were the shows twice a year? Is that...?

A: The showings were four times a year, I think. He had a show

for spring, summer, fall and south [resort]. We used to have a tremendous Southern business you know. And it was dresses and beautiful clothes. Now it's nothing. Shorts, slacks and a blouse or something. In those days, it was gorgeous. Gorgeous clothes!

Q: When he went to Europe, did he take a designer with him?

A: He went over, and sometimes he had his designer with him. He had a girl by the name of....I'm trying to think of her name. She was a designer, and he'd take her, or sometimes he'd send her alone.

Q: And how many couturiers was he apt to visit?

A: Oh, he'd see all of them.

Q: He'd see all of them?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: Maybe a dozen?

A: In those days there was Paquin and Molyneux and Vionnet, and Lanvin. I can't even go through and tell you all that they were.

Q: Did the manufacturers have to pay a caution?

A: No, we didn't pay to go in.

Q: You did not.

A: No. But I think later on they paid a certain amount. I think later on. But not in those days. No.

Q: They were shown at separate shows.

A: Yes...No.

Q: Now, let's go back to Maurice Rentner's business for a little bit. He had salesmen in the showroom as well? Because he didn't do all the selling.

A: Oh, yes. He had sales people. Of course he did. He had ...Oh, there was one fellow. He's not here; he's dead. He had quite a few. But, of course, he had sales people. He didn't sell; wait on everybody. There were just a very few that he waited on. You were honored that he waited on you.

Q: I'm sure. Oh, I'm sure. Yes.

A: But...He had sales people. He had a very big clientele. They used to go out.

Q: Out on the road?

A: Out to the different stores here, and see the buyers.

Q: And, tell me more about Maurice Rentner, if you can think of things that made him different from some of the other manufacturers. I mean, everybody had distinguishing characteristics. What was there about him?

A: He was a very smart person. He knew clothes. He loved to see women well dressed.

Q: Did he ever...Did he ever go into the stores...Into the department for which you were buying...?

A: He would go into the stores. Oh, sure. He was a meticulous man. And he was that way with everything. His own daughters. If they had something on he didn't like, he would not let them have it.

Q: So apparently...I've heard this same kind of thing from Bernice and Arthur Jablow. That is to say, that he was characteristically extremely well dressed, and had very high standards for everybody else as well.

A: Oh, Dorothy [Rentner] would come in there and she'd order some clothes, and if he didn't like it, she didn't get it. When Selma or Bernice came in he had to okay their clothes. When Selma was married, I had her wedding dress made. He asked me to take care of it for him.

Q: In other words, he didn't make her wedding dress.

A: No, I had it made. And it was gorgeous. Oh, she looked like a madonna. And she had one of those veils like a nun wears, you know, like a madonna, and she had the face for it. Oh, she looked beautiful. And, oh, what a wedding. I think that was the first wedding at the Temple Emanuel. It was gorgeous. And Bernice wore the same wedding dress. Maurice left it all to me. And evidently he didn't see it before...

Q: Did he ever talk about when he knew he was going into business or why he went into the fashion business?

A: Well, I think before he went into that business he was in the blouse business, as a young man.

Q: Ah, but he was...

A: I think he was in the blouse business. I think I heard say ...Now, look...This is all before my time. But I heard say he was in the blouse business, as a young man. And from that, he went into the dress business.

Q: Because, of course, before 1910, the ready-to-wear manufacturing business, or the garment industry, was blouses and skirts.

A: Blouses and skirts.

Q: Right.

A: And I think that he...That's before my time...

Q: But why...Did he ever talk about why he went into this industry at all?

A: Well, I think with the blouses, they started to put the skirts and the blouses together. That's how the dresses were started.

Q: I really am interested to know why he went into the fashion business. He might have become a doctor. He might have...

A: Oh, no. He wouldn't have...He didn't have the education for that. To become a doctor. He was a young man who never really had that kind of an upbringing.

Q: Well, that's what I'm trying to find out.

A: No, he didn't have that kind of school or upbringing. He became...He was a salesman, of blouses. And from a salesman, he got some money together and I guess he went into business.

Q: The clue always is that he was "able to get some money together."

A: He must have.

Q: Yes, yes.

A: He must have, because that's how he started the dress business. When I met him, he was already big...Because I remember that showroom, with the canaries singing. That was fabulous.

Q: It sounds it. And that was the building on thirty...

A: There were other manufacturers in that building. Like Herbert Dietz.

Q: I haven't mentioned him.

A: He watched every garment that was delivered. If the thing

looked wrong, he'd be furious. Everything had to be just so. His clothes had to be beautifully made. His clothes were beautiful. I took a blouse down to the cleaners the other day, and I had no idea...It was from the last year that Maurice was in business.

Q: Really,

A: You know, he used to make these suits, these beautiful suits. Soft suits. With blouses.

Q: And so you still had a blouse...

A: I had the blouse, and I took it down, and it was yellow. And I couldn't remember where I'd gotten it, and why it was yellow. And all of a sudden it dawned on me. It was from Maurice Rentner. I had it when I was at Bamberger's. I wore it...

Q: And you left Bamberger's in about 19...?

A: I left Bamberger's in 1947, I think.

Q: In '47. So you're saying that this blouse pre-dates...?

A: 1948, 1949...

Q: But that Maurice Rentner blouse has to be 35 years old.

A: And they were so beautiful! It isn't like a store today, where you see things in the windows for \$500, and the seams...The bottom is all up and down, you know? His clothes were delivered beautifully.

Q: And those were the days when women cared a great deal about...

A: Well, most manufacturers delivered clothes nicely. Now they're not so particular, no matter what the price is. It goes out looking like junk.

Q: Did Maurice Rentner do much advertising?

A: Not that I know of. He never did any advertising. In fact in those days we never mentioned the manufacturer's name in selling a dress. If a woman came to Stewart & Co. or Saks Fifth Avenue and bought a gown, no matter what she paid for it, it was Saks Fifth Avenue's gown. Never a manufacturer's. We didn't sell manufacturer's names, like we do today. We didn't have all these little booths, all these different departments and all. We sold the store that the woman bought the dress from, not the manufacturer.

Q: Right.

A: And the manufacturers didn't advertise.

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