ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MORRIS ARANOFF
FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD
LADY LYNNE, INC.

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

DATE OF INTERVIEW
Wednesday, February 9, 1983

INTERVIEWED BY
Mildred Finger
Lady Lynne Lingerie, Inc. was founded by Morris Aranoff and is now headed by his son, Steven. The firm has made basic merchandise since its conception in 1938, but in recent years has become much more involved with fashion. A relatively small firm, it is managed by a family team, and expects to continue as a privately owned firm.
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Q: ...for the Oral History Library of the Fashion Institute of Technology, this will be an oral history interview with Morris Aranoff, of Lady Lynne, Inc., which is a lingerie firm. The date is February 9, 1983; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Mr. Aranoff, would you start by telling us about yourself, your family, and how you grew up, where you grew up, and how you got into this business.

A: Well, I originally came here to this country when I was less than a year old, from Russia. I lived in Brooklyn...

Q: You were born when?
A: On September 15, 1904. I lived in Brooklyn for many years, and after my parents moved to Brighton Beach, I met Mrs. Aranoff. She worked with me in the lingerie firm.

Q: Had your parents been...or your...?
A: Nobody was in the business.
A: Nobody. I had gone through various different phases. I left school when I was 14, at Boys' High, and then I went to work downtown for an importer of cigars and liquor. I did "approval" work for the payment of "withdrawals" for taxes.

Q: I'm sorry--"Approval" work?
A: Approval. That means you did approval work. That means withdrawal, payment of taxes for the custom house to this firm, which was very interesting. But I saw that I wasn't getting too far in this particular line. I went looking for another position. My first job was shipping clerk for
Gordon and Schuval.

Q: Would you spell "Schuval"?
A: S-c-h-u-v-a-l.

Q: I assume they don't exist anymore.
A: No, no, no. They're out.

Q: And where was this?
A: This was 99 Madison Avenue.

Q: So the industry had already begun to move uptown.
A: Yes. They were in this area.

Q: Originally, it started way on the lower East Side.
A: No, this particular type of lingerie, which is the better

A: I was about 18. I worked there for a couple of years, and
then they had three or four brothers in the firm, so it didn't look like too
much future for me. I went looking for and applied for a job, and got one with
"Sussberg & Feinberg," another lingerie firm...

Q: Sussberg and Feinberg.
A: Sussberg and Feinberg, at 15 E. 32nd. And they were making

A: I must have been about 23, 22, something like that. Then, I

Q: At that point you were how old?
A: I stayed there for a while and there I met Mrs. Aranoff. She was the bookkeeper,
and I was salesman and factory man. I was there for a while--maybe five or
six years--and decided at that time, in 1938, to form my own business. I originally did not have a place to go to make patterns so I used a cousin of ours who is in the contracting business, and he let me use his place for pattern making and samples.

Q: What was the name of your firm when you opened it?
A: That was a contracting firm.
Q: Oh. All right.
A: And from there...
Q: So you were a contractor, first...
A: I wasn't contracting. I was making samples. This was a contracting... I had to have a place to work. I had no... place wasn't opened yet; my place. As a matter of fact... And I signed a lease at 15 E. 32nd Street. And then... Excuse me. 30 East... 30 East 30th Street, which was around the corner from the 99 Madison Avenue building. It was over in that area. And there I formed the first of Lady Lynne Lingerie, sometime in 1938. From there... We were there a long while. I worked there on 30th Street for about, I would say, 8 or 9 years. From there I moved to 105 Madison, which was a very big loft. It was about 12,500 sq. ft., and we stayed... That was a lingerie building. We stayed there until, oh, I would say, 1970 something, when somebody bought the building and turned it into offices. As leases became due, they did not renew them, and turned that floor into an office floor. My particular lease wasn't up; I had another few years to go. And by the time my lease was up, the office rental had collapsed a little bit, so I was allowed to stay there, as a month to month tenant.

Q: In other words, there is no production being done in that building.
A: No production on the floors that they made into offices.
Q: Right.
A: My floor was still factory.
Q: But they didn't want, whoever owned the building, didn't want...
A: They wanted...when the leases came due...Not only the production and the factory, but they were getting a lot more money, for the floor. However, my month to month operation went on for several years, until I was notified that they would have to have me out. I then looked around for another location, and found this location, 1 E. 33rd Street, three years ago, and moved in. I had an empty loft and fixed the whole place up. Myself. Factories, offices, showrooms. Everything you could think of went into this place. It was all empty. Now, in the last three years I've been operating here and using some contractors. Which I had to have because my business was expanding.

Prior to that, my son came in...He would work for me during the summer while he went to college. He went to Brown University. He graduated Brown and decided he wanted to go into this business. So he was with me and my wife stayed on, because she had nothing...She wanted to be active in the business. She stayed on, did showroom work and different operations in the office, did some bookkeeping to help out when the bookkeeper was busy. My son has actually been running the business for the past 6-7 years. He is the President, and I'm Chairman of the Board.

Last year we signed up with Guy Laroche as a French licensee designer for lingerie in North America, and in daywear in particular.
Q: Is that a separate division?
A: We make... We use it all together, but we use it as a separate division. We charge under Guy Laroche, so that we keep records of the shipments for their particular merchandise, on which we pay a percentage. And it has been very, very successful. We had promised, or signed a contract for the first year for $300,000 volume for Guy Laroche. We haven't... We're just starting to ship. We have already gotten orders for over $400,000. So we're over the year's minimum. And it seems that it has not affected the Lady Lynne.

Q: Yes. Now let's go back to Lady Lynne a little bit. When you opened your doors, so to speak, in 1938, what was your product mix? What were you manufacturing?
A: We made the same thing we're making now; slips, petticoats, camisoles.

Q: You have not gone into products beyond that?
A: The only thing we make occasionally is a nightgown here and there, but it's still all lingerie. Nothing else but lingerie. And, actually, we have a slip that we're still running that's been in our line for 30 years. One style, under a patented name, registered name.

Q: Which is what?
A: Back Magic.

Q: Back Magic.
A: Now that slip we still run today. Slips have gone down considerably in usage by the women, as you know. When they started to wear pants, they went out of underwear altogether. And use panties, pants, bikinis,
and what not. But now that they've gotten back to the flow of fashion--skirts, blouses, suits--we are more into the petticoat and camisole combinations; camisole and pant combinations, which we make as sets. And we make several slips, but that's not a big item.

Q: Do you consider yourself a moderate price or medium price?
A: We consider ourselves a "better."

Q: Better. So, tell me what your price range is.
A: Well, we go from retail on our petticoats from I would say from $15 and up. Retail. Our slips retail from $26 and up. Minimum slip is $13, 100% markup.

Q: In other words, you keystone. The stores keystone in this market.

A: And we're in all woven, which is important. We don't do any tricot. Only knit thing we use is on the teddy, where occasionally we have a few teddys, we use a stretch fabric, knitted. But everything else is woven--silks, satins, polyesters, dacron and cotton. All woven fabrics. I have been since my inception and still using it today.

Q: Did you decide...Was it a conscious decision...?
A: I decided because I did not want to fight Vanity Fair and Van Raalte and Kayser, with their prices. Because they have a big market and they're in the basements and various other low end products. Today they have some fashion goods, but it's still knitted, tricot, and that was the purpose of staying in woven. I've got my own niche. We have our own people. The woven are no-cling, while the others are not. And I stuck with that.
Q: I'd like to talk some more about production. When you started in this business, you did all your own production, with your facilities right on the premises of where you were. So it's always been an inside shop and...

A: Always.

Q: Were you members of ILGWU?

A: We are members of ILGWU, and members of our Association.

Q: Oh, you do have an Association.

A: Yes, we have an association.

Q: What's it called?

A: We have...They're not too active but we do have...I think the girl can give you the name. I don't know what they call it today, but Mr. Gross, who was a lawyer, he handled...The only reason I use the association is when the contract is up with the union, they negotiated, and we went along on whatever basis...And that was it. That was most of our use of the Lingerie Association.

Q: Is there just one? There are more than one in the garment industry, for example.

A: There are several. There are several.

Q: Oh, there are several.

A: There's an Allied, there's another type...We're in the better one, with the better makers, which today...three quarters are not in existence anymore.

Q: Yes. Right, right. All right. So that when you started, the facilities and the production were all right on the premises. And then you
began to use contractors, but only within the past several years.

A: Only within the past few years. Because our business expanded. We couldn't handle it all.

Q: Are most of your contractors in New York?
A: We have one in Jersey and one in New York.

Q: And what about offshore? Do you use any offshore facilities?
A: Well, we have...We import China silks.

Q: You do? Uh huh.
A: And we have been doing it now for a couple of years, and it's building up a little. It's a little too expensive, but we stick with it, and we today are running a camisole and pants mostly, and we may have a nightgown that we made that sold for $150 a piece.

Q: What do you think of the Chinese market? Do you think it's going to be opening up?
A: It'll open up, but I don't think it'll be too big, except in silk. Because they're not equipped for anything else.

Q: You don't do any production in Hong Kong or Korea or...?
A: No, no......

Q: All your production is here, because that's unusual.
A: Whatever I bring in, I bring in under letter of credit from China.

Q: Uh huh. And it's just fabric.
A: No, no, no. Finished garments only.

Q: Oh, they are finished garments!
A: I'm going to start going into fabrics, buying...They're coming through with some fabrics where we can get sample yardage of 10-15 of a color, and order what we want, which is a good thing. But we are today ....for the last two years, we have gotten in Chinese lingerie.

Q: I didn't realize that. The finished product. Does that mean that...Did one of you go over to China or...

A: We have an agent there who's in...He and his wife are in sportswear. He brought in some things; he made this contact. And Steve, my son, got very friendly with them, and they are handling our line. When she goes down ....Our designer makes up sketches, and they have to have a sample sent to us, from a sketch, and we okay it. Then we give them the order to go ahead.

Q: You mentioned your designer...Have you worked with designers in your own business. That is, I'm not talking about Guy Laroche, but...

A: All the time. All the time. We always had designers.

Q: You did.

A: Always.

Q: So that the way...When you first went into business, were you the administrative head of the business, so to speak?

A: That's right.

Q: With the managerial/financial...

A: Right.

Q: ....functions. But you did have a designer.

A: Well, I didn't have a steady designer, but I had somebody make designs for me.
Q: Uh huh. Well, I'd like to hear about that, because that varies, again...

A: Well, when you start out that way you can't just start with a designer...

Q: You started with a free lance designer.

A: Free lance. And then we had designers from then on, right along.

Q: As free lance people.

A: No, we had them both. Free lance...And for the last ten years we've had our own designer.

Q: And you have a designer who works on these premises, as everybody else does.

A: In the designing room. The next room. It's the designer room with sample hand...

Q: The designer and a sample hand and a pattern maker, I suppose.

A: The pattern maker we got with the cutting department.

Q: Where's the cutting department? It's on this floor too?

A: Yeah, we have a pattern maker. She came from F.I.T. She's a woman. She graduated from there.

Q: And...Now...I would love to know something about how you feel about stores and store relationships. Contrasting what it was when you first went into business with what it is today.

A: Well, we have today...We sell the top stores in the United States.
Q: I'm interested... Are you selling department stores, or specialty stores...

A: We are selling the top stores. Department and specialty, regardless. The top. And when I say the top, in each big city, we're selling the best stores. We sell small accounts, the little retail stores. Along Lexington Avenue we have some very nice ones. They buy silks, they buy our better stuff. They buy the Guy Laroche. But we have all these fine relations. The only difference, I would imagine, today, from years ago, was that they change buyers too often. They don't know too much.

Q: So did you used to get a lot of input from buyers, about what was selling and what wasn't?

A: Well, we get that not so much from buyers as from the merchandise people, who give us information from AMC, Federated, those kind of people.

Q: So that the big resident buying offices...

A: We have had... Only last week we had Tobe'. We have other fashion... My son Steve is in with all of them, and he gets them all up here and the designer... We've had interviews. We've had all kinds of editorials. In Women's Wear and... But that's what we get. But the relations, as far as the stores are concerned, we've been selling... Like Lord & Taylor had a change of seven buyers, and every buyer that moves up or changes brings in a new buyer, and tells her, "If you don't buy this line, you're crazy." That was the answer we got. So we have new buyer relations all the time. And we have orders coming in constantly. Every month. We have a basic line and we have a fashion line.

Q: Your basic line is... represents approximately how much of
the total?

Q: Our basic line represents, I would say, about 75% of our business.

Q: And then the fashion...
A: The fashion is the other 25%.

Q: 25%. Right. The... I gather that in your case, the question of succession isn't really a question. I mean, you already have your son in the business.

A: That's right.

Q: And now you have a grandchild in the business as well.

A: That's right.

Q: So that this will... Have you ever been tempted to sell out?
A: No, no. I've been approached but never tempted to sell out.

For the same reason that I have the second generation and the third generation. As soon as they want to get out or don't want the business anymore, it would be up to them, as far as I'm concerned. And I'm 78 years old; I'm not going to go on forever.

Q: It's very interesting to make the comparisons between what's happened in this industry and what's happened in menswear and what's happened in women's ready-to-wear. There are really very profound differences.

A: Well, the menswear business is a much bigger business, and absorption by bigger firms have been more readily accepted. Whereas, in lingerie, and our type of lingerie, there's been a lot of Mama and Papa businesses. The big ones are still there, like Vanity Fair and Kayser and all that, but they're into a lot of other things besides that.

Q: Well, forgetting Kayser for the moment, because there
certainly are no original founders still there... what would you consider a volume for a very small firm and a volume for a medium sized firm in this industry?

A: A medium sized?

Q: Well, for instance, is $1-$3 million a small firm? Is that the way you would judge it?

A: Yeah. Well, it's a Mama and Papa business.

Q: At what point does it become a medium sized...?

A: Well, it becomes a medium sized when you do $10-$12 million.

Q: $10-12 is what you consider...

A: And then from then on, whatever it goes to...You get up to that point and somebody wants to buy you and it becomes a division of somebody's big conglomerate...

Q: Yes, right. The feeling I have gotten from people I've talked with is that the average volume of what you would think of as a medium sized business is somewhere between $30-$60 million. Does that...?

A: It all depends on what type of business you're talking about. What type of garments. Now, dresses...

Q: No, no. I'm talking about the lingerie market.

A: Lingerie, no. In the lingerie market there's either our type firms or firms that do $8-$10 million, there are half a dozen of them. Then there's a big one like Barbizon that does a big volume, has their own mill...

Q: When you say "like yourself," approximately...I'm not asking you for your volume, but approximately how much volume?
A: We do over $4 million.
Q: Over $4 million. So you're somewhere...
A: We'll probably do $5 million when we get done with that Guy Laroche business. And it isn't a question of how much you do, it's a question of how far can you go in this particular type of business? Because it's limited in its scope, you know, after all. It is woven, and as a matter of fact, we buy almost all our piece goods from Barbizon, which is a competitor.

Q: Oh, really?
A: They have their own mill.
Q: I see. So they're vertical.
A: Yes. And they have the only woven mill in the country. That makes woven goods for lingerie. So we use them, their goods. We're their biggest customer besides themselves. They sell others...So that how far you can go all depends on how far...how high priced goods can sell. The economy gets better, in this economy, if we can sell a $150 nightgown, and a $50 camisole from China, we're doing pretty good, I would say.

Q: Yes. I would say so too. We've talked about your production; your sales. Let's talk a little bit more about how you handle sales. I assume that when you started in the business, the sales were probably done right from this showroom. Are you now...Do you have a sales person that travels?

A: Oh, yeah. We have a Sales Manager in here that travels to various parts of the country. We have a man in California who has an office showroom in the mart.
Q: Does he handle only your products?
A: Only ours. He recently put on a very expensive robe line which we didn't mind. But he carries mostly our stuff. And then we have one in Minneapolis.

Q: Really.
A: Yeah. Who came out of Van Raalte, when Van Raalte went out.
Q: Right. I haven't heard of Minneapolis as being a center, a mart...
A: Well, it's not a mart, but he is known throughout that area--Minnesota, Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin--and he has been stationed...Of course, he came from a firm that had its home office in Minneapolis, so he knows...

Q: Right.
A: So he came with us and he handles our line too.
Q: And so you have New York, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis.....
A: And then we have a traveling man who goes to Texas...and New England.

Q: A separate person that does Texas and New England.
A: He does them both.
Q: So whatever traveling there is to do....
A: Well, he had to do very little traveling, because we were getting business in those areas.

Q: Do you find that the stores are still sending people into the New York markets, even though you're now doing...
A: What do you mean...people...?
Q: Buyers...and merchandise managers...
A: Buyers? They're sending them in to every market. They come in.

Q: And you do five markets a year?
A: Five markets.

Q: You do five markets a year. That's a lot more than some years ago...
A: It's really...It simmers down to three markets. Two are duplications, a reviewing of the market previews.

Q: Well, how would you identify the three?
A: Well, the most important market that we find is the May market, because they're buying for the holidays. Buying for booklets. Then it comes into September...August they come in, they come in August for the finalization of the May market, and place their orders. They come in about...

Q: They place their orders for what delivery?
A: For the holidays.

Q: For November, December.
A: Right. Then they come in November...I think I've covered most everything.

Q: Right. So you were saying that the seasons...
A: The most important markets are the May market, the November market, and the January market.

Q: You consider January more important than March.
A: Yes. Because March...They come in in March mainly for warm
wear and for starting of booklets. You know, looking for samples for booklets. Actually, buying the line...They don't come in that much in March.

Q: I see. What's your lead time for delivery, if you have a market. You said your May market is important. How many months ahead of time is that done?

A: Well, let me put it this way. We are a stock house. No matter what price range we are, we have the merchandise. We make it. We sell them, and we have a lot of reorders.

Q: Oh, that's very interesting.

A: So we make our delivery on new things. We make them in the market 6-8 weeks from the time of the market. But everything else is as ready, for whatever completion date they want. Because we are constantly making merchandise, filling in our basic...We have basics...Certain numbers running for 3-4 years.

Q: So that you always keep stock.

A: Always keep stock. New numbers come in, we have like a cuddleskin material. I don't know whether you're aware of it.

Q: Cuddleskin?

A: Cuddleskin is satin on the outside and like soft brush on the inside. It's used mainly for sleepwear and robes. And we made a petticoat and camisole set for the last three years that has been quite successful. So that's another thing. We go in and we make it and we take orders for it, and we don't carry that in stock.

Q: It's been successful.

A: Yes, it's been successful. But in the last year or so it's
fallen off a lot because they're expensive.

Q: You consider that a fashion kind of...

A: Right. That's fashion.

Q: So that doesn't become something that you will continue to run...Your stock is on basic.

A: Basic. 95% basic.

Q: Right. Yes...And you said you do get reorders, because apparently reorders--whether it's this market or other markets--reorders have slumped considerably. People seem to want new merchandise all the time.

A: We get...Every month we get a "fill-in" from Saks, Lord & Taylor, I. Magnin, Neiman-Marcus, J.W. Robinson, and several other big stores, constantly, on the same numbers. They just keep filling them in. And when it comes to market, they buy new things.

Q: How do you feel about advertising? Do you do advertising on your own?

A: We do our own advertising. We do some cooperative, with the amount of business the store gives us, based on it. And most of our advertising is not newspaper, it's been booklet. Because booklets have been the big thing.

Q: You said the stores get the booklets from you with your merchandise.

A: They don't get the booklets from us. They make their own booklet.

Q: I see. Okay. So you are contributing to the cost of those
pages that have your things on them.

A: Whatever is on them.

Q: Right. And that's what you consider to be the most productive.

A: Well, those are all fashion goods. Because there's no sense going into a catalogue on a basic selling all year 'round.

Q: Which they sell right out of the stock on the floor.

I'm sorry. Let's just talk a little bit more about the history of the firm, because there are some years that are really very interesting, and we haven't touched on particularly. For instance, the war years.

Excuse me...You started your business just before the European war broke out...

A: Right. The war years are 1941-46.

Q: Right. And what were the...

A: Well, everything was on allotments, and we had frozen prices, you know.

Q: O.P.A.

A: O.P.A. So we got a certain amount for every three months...

We got an order from three different firms. How much we're gonna get those three months...

Q: Three different fabric firms?

A: Fabric firms. From that three months, you figured out how many dozen garments we'd get out, and we allotted our important accounts how much they could get. And that's how we went on for those years. We weren't

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making new styles to speak of, because there wasn't any purpose in it.

Q: Was there ever any involvement with the government in making your products for the WACs or the WAVEs? You have no government work?
A: No.

Q: So that what you were essentially limited to, there was no way of your business growing in those...
A: We were limited. As I said, we made whatever goods we had available, we used up in production, for those particular styles we had and allocated to those stores that were our best customers.

Q: When did polyester get started, or when did you get started?
A: Well, we started... When we started, we had rayon, and we had some silk. Then there was dacron and cotton. Then we had a combination that Barbizon, this firm, made. Jaunty Fabrics made a...

Q: The name of their firm is...?
A: Jaunty Fabrics, which is a division of Barbizon lingerie. And they made the combination dacron-nylon cotton crepe, and they made satin, and they made silk and nylon satin. They made various fabrics, and those are the fabrics that we used mainly.

Q: But you do use polyester today, I assume.
A: We use some polyester. We have it... Today we have some printed polyester from Japan. We used it several years ago. That's in our fashion line. We always use fashion goods. We got silk, that we're making up for Guy Laroche. It costs $12.75 a yard.

Q: Is that an American fabric, or Japanese, or...
A: That's American.
Q: That's American.
A: It's made in America by somebody, but they must have gotten
the raw goods from China, Japan....
Q: Yes. Right. Why do you suppose in this industry there has
not been offshore production?
A: By offshore, what do you mean?
Q: By offshore, I mean the Orient. Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan...
A: We have our Orient and Taiwan and Hong Kong, right here
in this city. You've heard of Chinatown.
Q: Yes, of course.
A: So we don't have to go over there.
Q: Is there a lot of production?
A: It can be made here, by cheap labor.
Q: I mean in your business...
A: I don't know anything about it. All I know is there are a
lot of cheap items that are made in lingerie, and you don't have to go over
to Korea. Maybe in other lines they do.
Q: Yes. Because in the apparel market...
A: Some apparel markets, they go there.
Q: I think it's now 65% at least. But it doesn't seem to be
in this market. That's what I'm asking.
A: No, no. I just told you--We have our Koreans and Chinese
here.
Q: Yes, but they're not used here very much. Thank you very
much. I appreciate your time.
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