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Interviewed by
Mildred Finger
Q. ...for the Oral History Collections of the Fashion Institute of Technology, and specifically for the project of the oral history of F.I.T. itself, this will be an interview with Mr. Sidney Bernstein, who is a Vice President of the Educational Foundation for the Fashion Industries. The date is February 5, 1985; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Mr. Bernstein, before we talk about your involvement with F.I.T., tell us about yourself; where you were born and when, and just about your life.

A. I was born in April 1904, in New York City. My father was a furrier. My schooling was at Boys' High in Brooklyn, and then at Columbia University. I graduated from Columbia University at the age of 20 in 1924. I was supposed to take the summer off, and then go into the business in the fall. I abhorred staying home, and my father, with two co-investors (my father was in real estate building...)

Q. In real estate?

A. Real estate. He was in business for himself. He was building a building at 224 W. 30th Street when I came to the office. One of his partners was on a second honeymoon. My father was in business for himself and he needed investors in the particular property...the Second partner returned from Russia (they were both furriers) with typhus. My father had gone to England to buy merchandise. So I was there with the building and helped with the language, and got involved.

It so happened that I was...got into the building with the leading
furrier in the world, world history...

Q. Would you spell his name please?

A. E-i-t-i-n-g-o-n. He occupied a large part of the ground floor of this store that my father took, and three other floors. They had arranged a "fur club" on the top two floors. The Fur Merchants Association and the Fur Dealers' Association. So in the process of that building being built, with Associations, I had contact with the leaders of the industry.

But I was not in fur. I was in real estate. So if I could read a plan and knew where the staircase was, I knew zero, plus how to read where the staircase was. In my setup there, my contact with the fur industry was with them as tenants.

Q. I see.

A. And the building completed occupancy February 1st; I went back in March to the "fur business"; I gave that to a broker who had out traded us, the best trader of fur. And I went to Europe. I was in the fur business. I went to Europe in the summer, and when I came back I liked the fur business. This could be a whole story in itself....

Q. Oh, yes. It certainly is fascinating.

A. And I went into business. At that time the Tiffany building, 150 West 30th Street, was to be built the following year and I became partners with somebody. And without going into too long a story,
because that could take four tapes...So I'd been in the fur business ....Or the real estate business, tied to the the fur industry, since 1924. The fall of 1924, or 1925.

Q. Had you studied business at Columbia, or were you a liberal arts major, or....

A. Just economics and music. And I started...I got out in three years and I was going to medicine, but that's another subject.

Q. That's interesting that you decided not to; that you decided to stay in real estate and fur business.

A. I did it because I didn't have the discipline to be a scholar. Music was not a language to me. If it was a language to me nothing could have kept me away. The finger of G-d touched Mr. Beethoven...

And in the business, over the next 3-4 years, before the Depression, we managed to pick up a little management business and had 13-14 buildings which had ridden through the Depression...

Q. Those were buildings which you didn't own, but which you managed.

A. That's right.

Q. Were they all in the garment industry?

A. All here at 29th and 30th Street. Between 6th and 9th Avenues.

Q. So you were really in the heart of the...

A. ... all through the Depression. And I became the specialist with the six blocks. From 26th Street and Eighth Avenue to 31st Street
and 6th Avenue; anything that happened with that area, I had a relationship with.

Q. Was the fur industry always there?
A. The fur industry had started on 25th Street or 26th Street, 27th Street, between 6th and 7th Avenue. That building that my father built, 224 West 30th Street was the shift up north. There were others. And also there was one at 333 Seventh Avenue....

Q. But they were never down on the lower East Side?
For example.

A. My father was on the lower East Side in 1900 as a retailer. In the retail business. Not as a manufacturer. It was on Bleecker Street, Broome Street and the rest, that you had your contractors. A lot of the furs came here, if my memory's correct. The production was in Germany. World War I started the real development here in a number of industries. Post World War I. So that in other words, if anything happened in the area, I was an "expert" in terms of the real estate. Even to the extent that mortgage companies called me up about mortgages for competitor buildings, for the City of New York, about certain factors, specializing in this area...It's been 60 years.

Now, in addition to that, what happened here if it was in this area, I became involved. In addition to that, F.I.T. was an outgrowth of the development of the High School...

Q. ...of Needle Trades.

A. Of Needle Trades. My father was very active in that
High School. He used to....

Q. What was your father's first name?

A. Alex A. Bernstein. He was one of the leaders of the industry. ...And he was very close to Nat Brown. Almost a mentor... Buddies with storytelling and biblical discussions and whatever... And the college was an outgrowth of ... It started with two floors of the High School on 24th Street. And then they assembled the campus area where they are now. And...At which time I became interested because, with the passing of age, time, I became involved in the college campus and became involved with the real estate, and took two years to get a college together for them and to build a second dormitory that they have. And in that period, I became involved with the college as a real estate advisor...

Q. That was what? About 35 years ago?

A. That was in the '50s. About that time I became interested in that and involved with real estate, and I became involved with Larry Bethel-ford, one of the Presidents, as you may have heard.... And I spent a few years on a project which was...We won't go into this now...

Q. Please...Now, let's go back to...Do you want to go back to Dr. Bethel. Is that...?

A. I was involved with Latin America, with the Alliance for Progress with Larry Bethel for a number of years, in the middle of
which, unfortunately, he died of cancer.

Then I remained there...partially, I think, around the corner from the college to oversee any real estate activities. As a Vice President I could sign checks...

Q. When did you get into the Vice Presidential end of it?
A. With the Foundation? Oh, I don't know. Fifteen, twenty years...

Q. Because you're skipping a lot here...
A. No, I said I was one of the officers, with a connection with the fur industry, and...

Q. At some point somebody must have said to you....
A. At some point I was appointed Vice President. So I'm saying, the reason being, because I got...The deal I got on the land was not a bad one. A neighbor, some activity...And...I'm only wise cracking a little bit. In other words, if they needed somebody... If he was out of town...and they needed somebody to sign a check, I was around the corner. I'm not in the garment industry...

Q. Well, one thing I would be very interested to know...Do you know, from any contacts that you might have had with those people at the board meetings or whatever, what really inspired them to believe (the manufacturers)....that there should be a school on a higher level than a high school teaching the trade?

A. As the development...The softgoods...There's no reason why the softgoods industry, any more than the hardgoods, meet all
the technology that the other does...Promotion, design and this...
It started like they probably started initially as "schneiders."
Then you have this amount of "Schneiders." It's a market. It's
designing. It's production. The entire thing requires a lot of
technology.

Q. So you're saying that...
A. The college needed technology...
Q. And you're saying that these men recognized it.
A. Oh, they recognized it. There was Morris Haft. Sam...
Q. Deitch? And Max Meyerson.
A. Max Meyerson...were the three fundamental founders. And
those who came after them...You could not have the industry without
having this managerial skill.

Q. Well, it's interesting that they recognized it.
A. Oh, sure. They were the forerunners. Absolutely. They
were forerunners. And it's the "leading" school in the world today.
And the only reason why...I'm speaking definitively although. . .
Because I was involved with the foundation of the Shenkar School in
Isreal, where they set up a curriculum. In other words, it got...
It wasn't created by F.I.T. But it was almost born...Nat Brown went
over there from F.I.T. as teacher...and the curriculum was set up by
F.I.T. It was a fundamental part of the standard...

Q. Yes, I'm going over there...I'm going on vacation, but
I'm going to lecture there for a day....
A. It's almost a career with me... And they were needed...

Q. And they recognized the importance of the need because it took a lot of money and a lot of...

A. The City recognized the need. The industry... The Foundation... It was formed... The college was... The sponsors in Albany... The Foundation and the City of New York. The trustees were appointed by the State, I think. Or the State had something to do with the Foundation. Because one of the originators or the founders was... They told you this didn't they? Was founded in Albany, by the legislature. Not in the Department of Education. I think it's the only one...

Q. And you have remained involved over the years, right?

A. Yes. When needed.

Q. Well, when you say needed...

A. All right... Kaplan of this... not in that sense... Or an Alan Johnson, those are the producers...

Q. But the school did continue to expand rapidly and they needed your help...

A. After the campus was started, and other things were started... So if you're there. You have some experience maybe... what you call any vital sense that I could take pride in personally, say... Not show off, but personal pride... It's... Of course, Shirley Goodman plus the Presidents... Marvin Feldman... plus Alan Johnson... And a half a dozen others, who were spark plugs...
Q. The spark plugs...Apart from Shirley and the Presidents ....were the industry people.

A. Yes.

Q. Uh huh. So they really had a lot to do with it.

.......Well, it's interesting...Here you are in the fur business, and...Or were in the fur business. And they really only started a fur program relatively recently.

A. Isn't that fascinating? Because at the High School it wasn't...I don't know how much of it...where it came from...? The trade...the production people...I don't know. These facts they could tell you.

Q. Well, I believe Leonard Hankin at one point...

A. Yes. Somebody generated it, so to speak, at the last moment. This is on the college level...One of the biggest compliments ...They're now giving a dinner with . . . for the President of Macy's. And what I heard in the meeting was ...He says, "Oh, I owe it to F.I.T. I have so many of their graduates." That gives you the picture of their role. I understand in the trade (I mean the real estate trade) that it's the leading training school for decorators... Home decorators, in the world.

Q. Well, there are a lot of fields in which they really excel.

A. One department that you don't tie to fashion; that you tie to softgoods...I don't know what else I could add to it. The beginning
you had...

Q. Tell me something about the board meetings that you go to. You're saying that your own role is very limited. That the school is rolling and you only look for real estate from time to time. But I assume, if I know how the board is run, that your contribution has to be there or you would not be on the board. Forever. It's been a long time. What else have you done? This isn't a question of being modest. It's a question of telling a history.

I assume, for example, that one thing that is important is that they get a businessman's point of view.

A. Yes. That's a collective judgment of many people. You have the experts presenting their information to help set directions. And then there's a discussion of the direction in terms of either departments or the opportunities that exist. You want merchants around who have executive experience. But in the sense of contributing to the school on the basis of education or direction, this is a direction which is checking out with you rather than the Board's starting the new ideas. . .So it isn't false modesty I'm trying to...

Q. No...I just wanted to get an accurate picture.

A. Let's go back a little bit...When you said that you became involved in this because you were right in the area...
And also because your father was involved...

A. Morris Haft, who built the auditorium, was the big starter of this, as you know. And I didn't bring him into it. It was a parallelism that I was in the trade, there was Morris Haft... when it came to real estate, that was discussed with me. Even on the campus perhaps, they wanted 27th Street; or 26th Street; that whole block of 26th Street, in addition, and there was Elly Guggenheim was on the board...I remember walking with Elly Guggenheim out on the street and we were talking about how many jobs were affected. When she saw that the 322 8th Avenue building, 20 story building, on 26th Street, with a thousand jobs, she began to talk about eliminating 27th Street. So we were talking and I said, "Well, that one there but not 282 7th Avenue, or this one or this..."
The whole front between 26th and 27th. You know. So, you measure it. We were walking there and she's bringing up a problem...Push that aside but cover this one...

Real estate wise, except for the houseing, that they now probably have gotten into...for the new buildings nothing has happened...

Q. Where is there going to be new housing?

A. That you would have to get from school authorities...
Q. You're not involved in it...

A. No, that's with the city. Available land that they have next to what exists there now. And I think they're negotiating for specific land... But that hasn't come through. But that you can get from the Foundation.

Q. So how do you see your role now?

A. My role? I don't know. If, as, and when they build... It's not a vital role in a meaningful sense. Because what are the vital roles now? They're industry problems or educational problems.

Q. Well, there are administrative problems.

A. So that insofar as there are problems to be resolved from time to time, it's important to have intelligent people who are listening. But that's not productive in the sense that you mean.

Q. Well, it is productive...

A. And also I think there's been a shift...Well, not a shift, but an increase in the commitment of the textile industry in addition to the apparel industry so textiles are larger now and can be tied to the larger factors of soft goods industry.

Q. That's interesting. Why is there a greater commitment now?
A. It's the Fashion Institute of Technology, and the softgoods industry....The production set-up is stupendous. Although I'm sure the textile people do business there. They have a product and they want to test the product. How are they going to test it? They can get better equipment, better testing reports at F.I.T. than if they had their own chemical testing done in their own department.

Q. You've seen changes over the years?
A. The changes in the last 10 years, 2,500 students, 2,000 students, and I forget how many part time students, perhaps 12,500.

Q. Its full time and part time, and the type of education is superb. Now I'm talking as a citizen. I know what the students tell me. They're getting an education.

Q. Do you have contact with students very much?
A. Some contact because of the scholarship I do.

Q. Oh, do you. Tell me about that.
A. I was one of the founders. You see, a long time ago, I gave $25,000 and became a "founder."

Q. You became a "founder."
A. Yes.

Q. And that involves...
A. I was a founder...Well, it was more than that. For
example, let's say there were 50-80 foreign students...whatever there were. My wife and I would entertain on Wednesday nights, eight of them in our house in Scarsdale or an apartment in New York. On a Wednesday night, six Wednesday nights, 8-10 students. Then on Thanksgiving, we'd invite these foreign students, 50, up to the house in Scarsdale for Thanksgiving dinner, an American tradition, and only Anita and her friends would be doing the cooking and the serving. Not domestic help. We're adding another little factor to the scene, you see.

Q. Tell me about the scholarship. Do you meet that students who are...?

A. When the scholarship is given, then there's the date of presentation.

Q. Is the scholarship given in the name of your membership...

A. Yes, my own scholarship, I gave in the honor of the President, Larry Bethel at that time so the Larry Bethel scholarship is given...Now, I'm not in the industry. In the industry you would do it for obvious reasons. So it's the Larry Bethel scholarship but it's based on the amount that I gave, which he or she receives and then we have a breakfast together and...But in the nature of the trade...From time to time you get a call..."Look, my daughter wants to come in or
my son would like to get into F.I.T. Do you think you can recommend or something."

Q. So you do have some exposure at least to the young people.

A. Yes. And being around the corner . . . it's a living thing in that sense . . . There was that Latin American thing which took a few years . . . The government gave us somebody from the State Department. Full time, if need be, to set up colleges for five years, to break them in to home base, to be here and then cut off . . .

Q. That was the project you were working on . . .

A. And the Israel thing. "Shenkar" college was set up there . . . Dorothy Jarnow is on our Board, and F.I.T. set up the curriculum. So there was some sort of an interflow. But not in the sense of an industry, giving ideas to . . . . . .

Q. All right. Let's go back to your own personal life a little bit. By 20 you were working. You were married. You got married . . .

A. I didn't marry until 1944 . . . '42. January. I have three children.

Q. Are any of them interested in this whole area, either real estate or . . . ?

A. My son is a clinical psychologist . . . There's my wife. There's my son. There's his wife and the two boys. There's my
daughter. And that's her daughter, publishing, clinical psychology.

Q. So, theoretically, people coming into this industry will be coming from different sorts of backgrounds and different kinds of families, because the families...(cross conversation)

A. There was a period...When I went in, you were lucky, you were fortunate...I will go all the way back. There was a period, in the '60s...you went into your father's business? Oh! Now, the training. It was a Jewish industry primarily. And the building, "307," for example, bought in '33, there were 100 tenants. Say, 98 Jewish firms. One was Italian, one was Scotch. Today, or last year, or three years from now, roughly—not statistically but close to it--60 -65% Greek.

Q. Really?

A. 65% Greek; 15-20% Greek-Jewish. Greek inside, Jewish outside. And the 10-15% carryover...So what had happened was that during that period...the 50's and '60's, post-war...What happened was your sons went to college. What did you do after you went to college? You went into the professions? Into the hard industries. And the last 3-4-5 years, everything is coming back. There are generations coming into the fur industry and the sons are following their fathers. One of the reasons is that the industry is growing in
style from $200 million or $300 million to a billion and a half.

Q. Well, that's tremendous.

A. Part of it being that...Now, this is Fred the Furrier; I'm giving you some of the things that he said...At the College, they just gave something...a formal affair in my honor...a teaching thing...in the fur industry...So the first one was Fred the Furrier teaching the students. So he said what partially happened besides the changes in the fur, the customers used to be matrons. The matron you know. The middle aged woman. Also there's the working woman. The revolution in the working woman. The working woman, she's also a woman, competing in the marketplace.

Plus, a cloth coat costs $400. Ours will cost $1,000 and you've got it for ten years. The economics plus the setup there. So the industry has had a complete jump in it. A lot of them...the men in the office now are coming to me, "We're giving a party because my son is in the business."

Q. So there is a beginning of a son succeeding for a father.

A. Yes... But that's a return. There hadn't been, for say a generation.

Q. That is interesting. So that there has been...

A. That may be in the garment... I don't know the garment. But it is here...I just signed two leases for two guys to lease a
a place for two years. The want to fix up the place because their sons are with them.

Q. Isn't that interesting.
A. And the style factor, of course. And that they opened...

Q. That they opened a third department?
A. Galanos... is house afire... right on the avenue.

Q. He's produced by a great firm isn't he?
A. They are produced here; they took an extra floor in the building to make his dresses.

Q. Oh, really? That's interesting?
A. ...345 Seventh Avenue. ...

Q. Well, of course, New York keeps changing all the time...
A. This is the only reason I'm saying it. That's part of the change. I don't think it's a passing thing, whatever it is. They find it challenging and stimulating, besides being a dollar and cents...

Q. Well, thank you very much. It's a very interesting perspective that you have on it and I appreciate hearing it...

...Mr. Bernstein, you were just saying something very interesting about the spirit of the school, and why you think it is all so meaningful. You called it "mind boggling." Would you explain that?

A. I think there are nineteen disciplines now, full and
complete, tied to today and tomorrow's trend, not . . . the weakness
inherent in the bureaucracy of a university, which tends—
certainly tenure—to be tied to yesterday. Especially in an
industry that changes. For example, last year I think it was
a $450,000 machine that was developed . . . I understand, I was
told, it may not be this machine, but I was told that in patternmaking
the exact thing should be checked for specific correctness;
that if you put on the material on a pattern, eight feet high, and
it's pressed and set down it comes to a depth...or a height,
rather, of 6 inches. I was told that that 6 inches, that tightness
of that material is stronger than steel. And that then when you
use a knife to cut it, it's a millimeter margin of error. Whereas
its a quarter of an inch in a normal cutting, as it is. And now I
know they're working on how to turn over a sleeve...They're working
on a sleeve that can be robotically done, on a fixed subject. So
it moves in the activities of the college, the research and development,
linked to tomorrow. Today, leaning toward tomorrow, not today based
upon yesterday. Which is rare. For example, go back a few years...
I understand the second finest costume museum in the world is the
Brooklyn Museum, and they sent it over to F.I.T. Why? Because
that's where it's used, and it's alive. And with the interplay of
disciplines and with the humanities, the general studies there, it's
a privilege that ones name is attached to it. And it does whether
one is production or what not. And there's a pride if you talk to the teachers. Meeting and socializing with this... There's commitment; there's a code; there's a standard that I call the quality of excellence.