Norman Goodman
Son of A. Goodman

Date of Interview
February 8, 1985

Interviewed by
Mildred Finger
Q: For the Oral History Collection of the Fashion Institute of Technology, and particularly for the oral history of the school itself, this will be an interview with Norman Goodman, son of one of the original founders, Abe Goodman. The date is February 8, 1985; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Norman, before we talk about your father's involvement in F.I.T., and your own involvement in F.I.T., would you tell us about his? Tell us some of his story. Where he was born and when and how he got into this business, and just as much as you can remember.

A: Well, my Dad was born in Rumania in 1898, and he came to the States at age nine with his father and, I believe, an older sister, and in the course of the next year or two, his mother and the rest of the family came over.

My Dad started to work in the garment industry when he was eleven or twelve years old.

Q: That means he worked all the way down on the lower East Side?

A: Oh, yes. They lived on the lower East Side and the factories were down there. He began as an errand boy at age eleven, and by the time my dad was fourteen or fifteen, he was an experienced cutter. I can remember stories that he told that when he was about twelve or thirteen he was taken out to lunch and he watched them take out a $10 bill. And he said, "Gee, will I ever live to see the day I can earn that kind of money?"

Q: How did he learn to be a cutter?
A: He said he just watched. He was working these 15-18 hour days, and he would work and then stay and watch and observe the different trades. He had a knack for cutting and he worked at it and became a cutter there at fifteen or sixteen years of age, a skilled cutter. Which meant, in those days, spreading the fabric and understanding the patterns.

My Dad then had a responsibility with his family, and I believe he went into business for himself for the first time when he was 19 years old, and then he went on to form a partnership with someone else—Goodman & Davidson, I believe the company was called—in the early '20s, and built up a rather large business.

Q: Was that still on the lower East Side?

A: No. The garment industry moved up, I believe, to the West 20's. I know my Dad told stories about how the industry would move and how he would move his place, because that was the building to be in. And then he formed A. Goodman Company in 1932 or thereabouts, which was his sole business—no partners—and he opened at 525 Seventh Avenue; he had moved from 1410 Broadway, or something. 525 was the building for his price dresses. Everybody sort of moved together. The showrooms were, at that time... 525 was his price range.

Q: It eventually became 530.

A: Yes. In 1936 or 1937 he went to 530 Seventh Avenue, which is the building he stayed in until 1960.

My Dad became very active in the industry itself. He became very close with a lot of the union leaders—David Dubinsky—and they
made my Dad the sole counter-signature for their health fund.

Q: Really?

A: They wanted one manufacturer to represent them on the fund, and he was the signator of that. And my Dad was active in the charities, especially the Home and Hospital of the Daughters of Israel; he was chief fund raiser and treasurer for them. And this was, I would say, started during World War II, when he was on the War Production Board.

Q: In those days, where did the labor come from? How was it trained?

A: Well, at that time all the labor in the industry was basically foreign born. I can recall... The sewing machine operators, for instance, were mostly men; foreign born men who learned their trade in Russia or Eastern Europe. There were very few American born laborers involved in the sewing operation, the cutting operation, the finishing. The finishers, I think, at the time, I remember were hand sewers, were West Indian.

Q: Really!

A: Yes. A predominance of West Indian. But the sewing machine... the highly skilled operators were Eastern Europeans, I would say mainly ethnic groups -- Jewish and Italian. And it's odd, they had very few women. Out of the 60 machines in my Dad's plant, at the time...

Q: Was this at 530?

A: Yes. He was one of the few manufacturers who did not sub-contract all of the manufacturing. He had his own in-house plant. My Dad liked to do his own cutting and control a portion of his own
sewing operation. And of the 60 machines, I remember there were 54 men and six women. And, again, none of them American born.

Q: And, of course, the pressers were men and they were...?
A: All the pressers were from Eastern Europe. I don't think at that time there were any... I saw a sprinkle of American born skilled workers in the cutting operation, but none of them on a sewing machine as skilled operators.

Q: What about designers? Did he work with a designer at that time?
A: Yes. The designers at the time... Judy Richards... I think we had for several years, American born. She used to make trips even then, in the '30s, to Paris, twice a year. For inspiration mainly.

Q: But up to that point there really wasn't a school for designers?
A: No school for designers, and there were no name... Very few, I should say, name designers. I remember in the early years Norman Norell.

Q: Right. Well, in those days it was the manufacturer's name that...
A: It was the manufacturer's name. It was Maurice Rentner. I remember when Bill Blass started there; it was Maurice Rentner. That was the label name.

Q: I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you but... You were saying that your father had... At the time of the war.... You had just mentioned the words "War Production Board."

A: Yes, he became very active on the War Production Board for the industry. He would go to Washington once a month, he and several other
manufacturers at the time. There was a restriction, I think it was named L-85, where they were limited to 3\(\frac{1}{2}\) yards per garment, and other things.

At that time I think he became active also in the founding... This was the '40s...in the naming of the Educational Foundation for the Apparel Industry. I believe that's when the organization started. It didn't in terms of a school. And my first exposure to it was when I was discharged from the service in May of '46 and Dad said, "Well, what are you going to do now?" And I said, "Well, I'm thinking of going back to school, to college." And he said, "Well, have you thought about the business?" And I said, "Yes, I've been thinking about that." And he said, "Well, I'd like you to come down and meet Dr. Mortimer Ritter. He has started a new school for the industry and I'd like to have you meet him and hear what he has to say about school, etc."

Q: Did your father at that time tell you anything about how the school had come into being? I mean, did he discuss any of his friends' interest, or was that something that was not said...?

A: The only recollection that I have is that he said he was helping to support a school for the industry, and he wanted Dr. Ritter to explain to me what it was all about and, at the time, I didn't even think about attending the school. It was just that I was going down to meet Mortimer Ritter, who talked to me about this particular school and about my going into the industry. And I remember going down to 24th Street and 7th Avenue to the High School of Needle Trades, I think was the name, and going up to the 8th floor and meeting Dr. Ritter.
I guess he was the guiding force at the time. And he spoke to me and I told him I had just gotten out of the service and I was looking forward to going back to school and ultimately to go into my Dad's business. And he took me around and after spending about an hour with him, I decided I would attend the management course at F.I.T. I had had enough of being away from home for two and a half years. I liked the idea of being in the city; and the course, as he outlined it, seemed to fit in.

Q: What did he tell you about the courses?

A: Well, he explained that the school was two years old and that in addition to the design school - which predominately F.I.T. was - it had a management course; a scientific management course, which dealt with production and business management as it relates specifically to the apparel industry. And that I would learn... There would be time/motion studies of the sewing machine operations and the cutting operations, as it applied to my industry. So that if I went to another school, where I might be involved with heavy industry, something that I could never relate to if I was going into the apparel industry, I thought, "Gee, that makes sense." And I decided I would start. It was September of '46, which I believe was the beginning of the third year. The first graduating class had just graduated in June of '48.

Q: No, I think the first graduating class was June of '46.

A: I'm sorry! June of '46!

Q: Because you started in September?

A: Yeah. Right. The school had started in '44.

Q: Yes. Because they have just celebrated the 40th anniversary.
A: And my Dad, I think, at the time, although I remember he was friendly with Morris Haft and several other members, and I believe at the time he was supporting it by giving a scholarship so that a student could attend F.I.T.

Q: Was there a fee at that time?

A: I went to school under the Veteran's Administration, and the tuition...there was no tuition that I can recall. But there were other costs involved. It was a nominal $400-$800 a year. That would provide a scholarship for a student. And I believe that out of the total class at the time, the management class, I think we had about...no more than 20 students.

Q: How many male and how many female?

A: All male at the time. In management, all male. The design - fashion design and millinery design - was predominately...the rest of the school was 95% female.

Q: Well, that sounds about right, because I've heard comparable figures. And so you spent... How many years did you spend?


Q: And during the time that you went to school here, were you working for your father as well?

A: Well, I went to school... The first year, basically I was in school full time. I would go up to my Dad's office in the late afternoons, but I wasn't very active in it. So my senior year we had a program whereby you would have field work, and I worked in his factory,
as a matter of fact, getting hands on experience with that operation.

Q: What were your instructors like during those years? Do you remember them at all?

A: Yes. I remember Dr. Nathan Brown, who was a sociology...

Q: Yes. He went on to found Shenkar College in Israel.

A: Right.

Q: He taught Sociology? I didn't know that.

A: He taught... He was a Sociology teacher.

Q: So you did have some liberal arts courses?

A: Oh, yes. We had liberal arts courses. And the school was...

At that time it was still learning its way as to which course would apply to the management. We even learned courses such as draping, you know. We had a sprinkling of the fashion courses.

Q: And the design courses...Yes?

A: I can remember there was a trade show... There was a man named Arthur Tarsius, who was active in putting together trade shows for the textile industry. And then he started one for the fashion industry, and this was in '46, in the fall of '46, when I first started F.I.T. They had a show which was put together at Grand Central Palace. If you recall, that was the predecessor of the Coliseum. That was where New York had trade shows. And mini-conventions. Things like that. And F.I.T. was asked to participate. I believe it was in the spring of '47, because...

Q: That's the first time I've heard that story.

A: It was the first show. He was the man who put together these sorts of shows for different industries. And I remember F.I.T. was
asked to participate and we were putting together a display of the school and what the school was all about and what the school did. And we put... We had models. The management department had a model layout of the plant, showing process cutting and manufacturing and sewing machine layout of a particular product, and we'd show the product and how it was designed and how the plant was laid out, and the fashion areas would show how the students were learning the design areas.

Q: Fascinating.
A: Yes. I don't know what happened to that trade show or how it evolved or what. But I remember that particular one.

Q: And the students worked on it?
A: Yes. All the students worked on this project. And I remember tours coming through the school in those years. My Dad would be down with the men and they would take various political people... They were always looking for support for the school.

Q: And when you finished school, after two years, you then went to work for your father?
A: Yes.

Q: Tell us about that. What was it like to be the son of a manufacturer? You had had a little bit of training... What were your relationships with the people there, and how did you apply your skills now?
A: Well, it made things certainly much easier for me, and I think the people in my Dad's plant at the time got the idea that I was familiar with a lot of the operations. I actually learned how to sew at a sewing machine. I could sit down and thread a bobbin, things
like that. They were not... At that time, many people in managment, who had had the kind of training I had had, were coming in...

Q: I'm sure they were.
A: As the owners of the business and understanding...

Q: Most owners had probably come up through the ranks themselves and had learned that way, without learning any other managerial skills. And you stayed there for how many years?
A: I was there for 10 years.

Q: Ten years. And you went through, I assume, the whole... You went through production, sales, working with designers...administrative business. Did you maintain any kind of contact with F.I.T. during that period?
A: Yes. After I graduated I was active in the alumni association, in the earlier years. As a matter of fact, several of our designers were products of the Fashion Institute of Technology, and a couple of them were at school when I attended school. They had gone into other companies.

Q: Can you remember the names of anybody?
A: Yes. I remember in the late '50s, Pat Sandler..

Q: Oh, sure.
A: I remember... I can't remember the names right now. There were three or four who...

Q: But there was nobody from your class?
A: Not in my.... No. They were a little later. But I had gotten to know them, because I had visited the school and I spoke to 6-7 management classes about my job in the industry; what I had gotten out
school; what I had specifically learned that I had applied in my business. See, a lot of the management graduates went to specific areas of the business, mostly into production and they were production managers. When they got out of school they were hired by companies to work in their plants.

Q: Because those fields were not very...
A: Time/motion studies, work flow... And that's where they wound up. Very few of them had the opportunity that I had, of going into my father's business, where the...

Q: In other words, there were not many second generation people in your classes? I'm interested in knowing about...
A: In my class, I was the only boy whose father was...
Q: Do you know of any others who went into business because their fathers were in the business?
A: Yes.
Q: Who?
A: I don't recall the names, but there were a couple of...large companies. They weren't New York firms. They were popular priced companies. One in St. Louis, a big coat-suit operation...
Q: In other words, you did have people from out of town, in the very early days?
A: Yes. Not that many... But that was, oh, about 3-4 years after I graduated. I went back to school and I remember speaking to a class where there were several students there from the midwest, Baltimore... whose fathers were in the business and they had to learn...
Q: About technique... Norman, what happened with your father's business as the years went on? Because ultimately he went out of business and you went out, or you left?

A: Well, I started to get involved in real estate. And I had a younger brother in the business at the time who was working in the business but not...

Q: What was his name?

A: Bob. He had gone to Ohio State and studied liberal arts basically, and he was not that happy...

Q: With your father's business?

A: Yes. Right. And my Dad... We talked about it and my Dad decided that if we really didn't want to go on with the business that he'd think in terms of retiring. And after the summer season... After the resort-spring line, in the fall of 1959, we sort of thought in terms of liquidating the business in 1960.

Q: And that's when you entered your real estate business full time?

A: Yes. I had a brother-in-law at the time as an associate who was starting a company interested in managing real estate...

Q: So you weren't builders?

A: We were also builders.

Q: You were?

A: Yes. We had partners who were builders.

Q: In what part of New York?

A: Well, we started in the city itself, with apartment houses.

Q: Oh, I see. You weren't commercial?

A: No, not at that time. And that was in... Actually I started in '55, but I was just interested in...
Q: Because I have talked to Sidney Bernstein, who is involved, of course, heavily in this area.

A: Oh, yes.

Q: That's why I wondered if you were at all involved...

A: No, no. We're mostly commercial on the West Side of Manhattan now. And my brother went to school and he went into the insurance business, which he's still in today. And my Dad, of course, after 6 months out of business, had a lot of... He missed it. It was a part of his life. He grew up in it and that's all he ever did, and from the time he went out, he just couldn't adjust to the fact of retirement. So Molly Parnis needed somebody to set up a shop for her. She... I think Adolph Klein... Remember that name?

Q: Uh huh. I remember Adolph very well.

A: Okay. Mollie's... No. It's interesting, because my Dad sort of got... I think before Mollie married...

Q: Who'd she marry? Leon Levinson... Before she married Leon Levinson?

A: I think he sort of got them together, yeah. They had the floor right above us at 530 Seventh Avenue. A. Goodman was on the 17th floor and Mollie Parnis was on the 18th floor in the '30s, '40s, '50s. Mollie Parnis called our former sales manager and she wanted to speak to me. And I met with Mollie. She thought maybe I was interested in coming back and doing something and I said, "No, I'm not really the one you want. But my Dad is just very anxious to do something." And they got together at Mollie's apartment, and she desperately needed
somebody to watch the business, the back. She was a great sales person and she just needed somebody to pick the pieces up from that point. And he just fit in with that, and he started with Mollie, I believe in 1960. And he worked there for 4-5 years. He was in his late '60s...

Q: Late 60s?

A: Well, he was about... Well, he was born in 1898, so he was in his late 60s. Dad passed away it'll be three years this January.

Q: Right. And so... It's really very interesting that you did make use of your training for a period of time, and then do what a lot of the people in the garment industry have done - which is to go over to real estate.

I thank you very much. This has really been a different perspective from some of those that I've had.

Thank you.

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