ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

ARTHUR JABLOW

ARTHUR JABLOW, INC.

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

DATE OF INTERVIEW

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INTERVIEWED BY

Mildred Finger
ARTHUR JABLOW

see also

Rentner, Maurice, 1889-1958.
Memoirs of Maurice Rentner from varying perspectives.
Arthur Jablow is a man who typified the entrepreneur born into a family involved in apparel manufacture, but not always sure he would go into the business. When he did, after college and a brief career in retailing, he joined his father's business, but soon became head of the business and changed the name from George Jablow, Inc. to Arthur Jablow, Inc.

During the period of World War II, he made uniforms under government contract, at the same time continuing his own business. In 1969, he closed his business to pursue other interests.

There is a most interesting section in the Oral Memoirs of Maurice Rentner, (his father-in-law) which provides considerable insight into other facets of the ready-to-wear business.
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Q: Would you like to start with your father's life, and let's talk about...

A. All right. He (George Jablow) was born in Poland, and I figure it was around 1879. Somewhere like that. And he came here when he was five or six years of age. But his father had come ahead of him, and he was in the apparel business, his father. He had been a tailor in Poland. But when my father arrived, he was very young, and he went to school here, and finally when he was, I would say, 16 years of age, he became an apprentice in the apparel trades, and he finally became a cutter, and that was his... He was head cutter and he was a union man, and so forth and so on, and he... I think that was about 1902, when he was about 18 years of age. And he worked as a cutter until the Second World War, which ended in 1918, I guess, and now he was in his thirties, and they formed a firm... There was a fellow by the name of Max Epstein, who was considered one of the best designers in New York City for coats and suits. My father was the technician for the manufacturer and he was the head cutter, and the running man, or head salesman, was a fellow by the name of Aaron Goldstein, and it was known as Aaron Goldstein & Company, but they were three equal partners in the business. And they had a... they opened the place on 12 West 27th Street. It was right off Broadway, and they had three floors in that building. I remember when I was a child I used to go visit them. And they did a smashing... They were big producers, in the coat and suit field, for a long, long time.

Q: They were manufacturers?

A: They manufactured everything.

Q: They also... Did they make their own merchandise or did they
contract it out?

A: They had their own factory, but they also used contractors. That was the normal thing. Not everybody had only their own factories, because it wasn't done at that time. But they were manufacturers, and they shipped... And the merchandise, by the way,... was quite inexpensive, I think, retail wise. Maybe $40-$50.... Every manufacturer's desire was to have their children come into the business, and... It was funny... Epstein had a son and Goldstein had a son, but they never came into the business. I was the only one, eventually, who was invited into the business, because I hadn't planned to go into the business. But I came in in 1930. That was a long time ago. And they still had a good business, but it was... Everybody had moved uptown, and all the prices had risen. And in 1930, it was panic practically. The stock market had crashed in 1929. Actually, it was October 1929, so it was practically '30. And it was..... Things were terrible. The retailers were doing no business, and it was just the most difficult times. And, by the way, that lasted for over three years. It went from '30 to I think '34. And it was interesting to see the havoc it created in the apparel industry, because many firms failed because many of them had been spending their time with the stock market, which had risen between '25 and '29, and they didn't have anything to fall back on.

Q: They were usually undercapitalized anyway, weren't they?

A: Yes... The banks... in those days, were very liberal. And, by the way, at that time, even with all the trouble, the interest rate never got above 3-4%-- whatever it was-- So they had a chance to do business if the
banks would loan them money. And I'll never forget...In 1930, when I joined my father to help him in the business, he went out one day....

Q: The business was still located down on....?  
A: No. The business at...by that time had moved up to Seventh Avenue. Twenty-seventh street and those places had gone by the boards. Everybody had moved up.....

Q: During the Depression?  
A: Yes. They had moved uptown, because that was the new center of fashion. But what I wanted to tell you about was what actually happened with the banks and so forth. He went out one day and he was gone for several hours. Which was very unusual, because he always would say where he had gone, when he came back, he wanted to talk to me. And I said, "Well, what is it? Aren't you feeling well?" He said, "No...It is something much more serious." Well, he had received a call from The Bank of Manhatten, in the morning. That was...Chase Bank was the growth out of The Bank of Manhatten. That they had decided not to loan any more money to the apparel industries. That they thought it was a bad risk, and just wanted him to know. Well, that was his life's blood, the way to run a business.

Q: He never dealt with factors?  
A: No. Factors was much later...

Q: Really.  
A: Oh, sure. So he didn't know what to do. So he went to see...There was a little fellow who had come out of the coat and suit business that had joined Sterling Bank...Max Meyer, his name was, I'll never forget him. He was a wonderful little gentleman, and had spent his whole life in the
coat and suit business and knew everybody...He was looked upon as the dean of the industry. And he had gone out of business, and he went to work for the bank. And Pop went over to talk to him, and he took Pop into Sam Golding, who was the head of Sterling Bank at that time, and he listened to Pop's story, and Max Meyer told him how long he knew George Jablow and Sam said, "There's no problem. As much money as you want, you have." And from that time...By the way, I'm still a depositor at Sterling National. I never would leave them. But that's what they did to help these manufacturers tide over, when the big boys ran away from them. And that was the real beginning of Sterling Bank in the apparel trades. This was much before...what's his name? ...
The guy that runs the bank now....Before he was even in the bank....

Q: I'll find out for you....

A: But that's what went on. They weathered these three or four years in the thirties, because it was very difficult. And then everything stabilized again, and people went on and did their business and so forth. By that time, fashion was the big thing. Designers came in....

Q: Before you start with that, could you go back a little bit and let's hear now about you and...When you were born and where, and how you got involved in the business.

A: Well, I had...I went to the University of Pennsylvania...

Q: When were you born?

A: I was born in 1912. So I went to the University of Pennsylvania, and I got out of college in '29. That's when I got out. And I had chosen the retail field. Why I can't tell you. But I liked it. Always did. And...By the way, I would have been the head man at B. Altman, if this
hadn't come about. Because the other guy they...Altman's had decided to have a training squad, so there were two fellows. Myself and a fellow by the name of Raymond Vandenberg. I don't know if you ever knew him. He was out of Princeton. And we were as different as day and night. He was just a lovely... And he was so amusing. And we went through the whole store. We worked through the store. I think the original pay was $14 a week, when we came to work. And I had no idea of going into the apparel business. I wasn't even trained for it. But when I got in with my father...The reason I went in there was because there were so many things going wrong at that time, you know, in business generally, that he needed all the help he could get, somebody who was loyal to him. And by the way, I always made much more money than my father. Because I only would work on one basis-commission. So when I...

Q: So you sold.
A: I sold. But I only sold where there was tough selling. You see, where we had nobody else to sell, I used to sell there. I didn't mind that, because there was no problem selling...

Q: About what year did you join your father?
A: In about 1930....Maybe '31...
Q: Because you were still very young then.
A: I was a kid. Absolutely. I was born in'14, so I was...
Q: No, you said 1912.
A: 1912...But I was...still a kid. But that was nothing. Everybody started as a kid. But anyhow...That's what I...and then there was a development over the years, and...
Q: Can you describe the development?
A: Well, the development was that when I came in I eventually...My father got much older, so he decided to take it easy. He never retired by the way...just to take it easy...But...I ran it, then I decided...
Q: It was still called Aaron Goldstein.
A: No. It had been changed from Aaron Goldstein when they moved uptown....And Goldstein had died and Epstein had left, so they changed it to George Jablow. And then when he was uptown for...
Q: What building was he in?
A: I guess he was .. 530...530-7th Avenue.
Q: Because you were always only coat manufacturers...
A: Yes. But we had started there. That's how.... And then I think I took it over in '37 or something like that...or was it '38. I don't remember. Because I ran it for I don't know how many years...The dates here are difficult to remember. When I took it over I changed the name of Arthur Jablow, and...
Q: About what volume were you doing at that time?
A: We did a little over $3 million.
Q: And this is just before the Second World War.
A: No...The Second World War was 19...
Q: Forty.
A: Huh?
Q: Forty or forty-one.
A: Yes. It was before...Sure. Yes, that's right. And then we had this...We were going great guns, till we were hit by this recession
that came at that time.

Q: Now, were you and Bernice married by then?
A: Bernice and I were married in '37.

Q: Thirty-seven. So it was about that time that your father-in-law's influence--Maurice Rentner's influence--was available to you, or his input...
A: Oh, yes...yes...We used to...I used to spend a lot of time with Maurice. We did a lot of talking about business...there was a mutual respect. In fact, many times he wanted me to come into his business which I would never think of. Because I wanted to keep everything separate. And Bernice and I were married in April of 1937, and we've been married ever since. And do you know how many years that is now? Forty-five years! This year. It's a long time. I got a kick the other night when you said that you and Bob had been married 33 or something like that...You'd think the world was coming to an end. It's nothing!

Q: Okay. Now...To get back to the business. About how much money do you think...How much capital did you need to launch your own business? In those days...
A: Oh...Well, capital wasn't...In those days it wasn't difficult. I think the original was $100,000. But it wasn't like it is today, Mildred, where you couldn't do anything with $100,000. At that time a hundred thousand dollars was still a lot of money.

Q: Yes.
A: There was no inflation...Borrowing was cheap. And you could do a lot. And don't forget, the banks, as I said when I started this, we were
always liberal...They gave me two and a half times my capital. Now, on the face of it, it seems sheer nonsense. But there was no question about it. They were always absolutely marvelous to me. And...Ted Silbert was the name I was trying to think of ...So I used to get $250,000...and I never needed that...

Q: As a line of credit.
A: Yeah. I never really needed it, because we had a wonderful cash flow. Most of my customers used to pay promptly. It wasn't...They weren't looking to defeat you. They used to try and send you the money as quickly as possible.

Q: Did you start off with a designer? In your own business ....under your own name?
A: Yes. We had a fellow by the name of John Pollack, who was in the coat and suit business. He was all right. And then after Pollack came David Kidd. But we always made coats and suits, and dresses, you know. Ensembles...

Q: Ensembles...And you started going to Europe as soon as the war was over...?
A: Oh, yes. I made...in '40...I guess it was over in '45 or '46, around that time. I always went to Europe. I went twice a year at least. Because I did a lot of purchasing in Europe. I bought a lot of piece goods in Europe. Our mills just couldn't seem to stand up you know for the novelties and things that you wanted to be different. And Europe was the place to buy them. So I used to go there and pick of everything.

Q: Did you buy in France, or Italy...Germany...A combination?
A: I used to buy wherever it hit me, but it was mostly... I would say it was mostly France and England, most of the buying. Germany came on later on. Italy was also very good, but in Italy we bought a lot of...you know...silks and things like that in the Como area... But it was very interesting. Because Paris was the center, and we all came to Paris and we worked from there. And it developed, and finally I...went out of business in...what was it? Sixty-nine or something like that.

Q: During the years that you were in business, did you work... Would you talk a little bit about the inside shop vs. the contractor... what was your labor setup?

A: That was the big cancer of the apparel business in New York City. The union, as such...

Q: Was it Amalgamated you worked with or ILG?

A: ILG...The International Ladies Garment Workers...By the way...During the war I worked with Amalgamated, because I ran a big uniform business during the war. That's a story by itself, completely. But what happened was, I think one of the troubles with the apparel business was directly caused by lack of farsightedness on the part of the unions. The unions worked on the basis of trying to protect the senate shops. Now, the senate shops were the old time shops...like, my shop, because our people had...

Q: How do you spell "senate"?

A: Like the "senate." The government...S-e-n-a-t-e...That was the term they used. They were trying to protect to old time workers who had been in the business for years, to protect their jobs. Instead of retiring them, and letting the firms manipulate with new machinery and new tools and so
forth, they didn't do that. Now, the basic reason for that, by the way, is that their retirement funds were not funded correctly. They didn't have the money to retire these people, so... They never let on to that, incidentally. But they tried to throw snags in the way of these people retiring, and by doing that, you couldn't use anything new... And I used to raise holy hell with them, because when the war came on, I wanted to do something. I didn't want to go into the service. I had two kids and I was married. So I went down to Washington and offered my services to the Navy Department... They were going to have WAVES or something.... I went down, unsolicited, and gave them my name. Well, I didn't know that Dave Dubinsky, who was head of the union, and Mayor LaGuardia, were talking that they wanted to bring some of this war work to New York City. So when my name was mentioned, Dubinsky--who had worked for my father; he was a cutter also--Said "Jablow's okay." So they called me back...

Q: In Washington?
A: To Washington. And they said, "Let's go." I used to work 28 hours out of a 24 hour day. You have no idea... There was nothing. There were no patterns. There were no sizes. There was no nothing. They didn't know what the hell they wanted, and so forth.

Q: Where did the design come from?
A: Well, originally, Hattie Carnegie had made the designs, so... Well, Hattie Carnegie had made the designs and they were made very nicely but you couldn't produce them, you know. So... It was just a holy mess. So, we took hold and we started to work on these things, because they were going to have many more WAVES than they thought they were going to have. It was just
something. And there was an admiral that I worked with, and I got a big citation and so forth. The interesting part was, when I organized the business I didn't organize the International Ladies Garment Workers, because I wanted to work section work, and bring it out at a price. So, we organized it under Amalgamated, and I had a partner in the business who was an expert mechanic. A production man. He was marvelous. We started to manufacture these things like...

Q: Still under the name of Arthur Jablow?

A: Under the name of Arthur Jablow, yes. And we ran our civilian business...and I ran this on the side. And Louis Adler, who owned 530 Seventh Avenue and had many lofts empty in the building during the war gave me a floor for free, as his contribution to the war effort, and I shipped from there, from 530 Seventh Avenue, and we used to have government inspectors come up and inspect the merchandise. But we manufactured all over New York City...For example, I had the right to go to Paul Parnes and he had to make me a thousand garments. And if he wouldn't make them, we'd take over his shop! You know what happened here. We got...Every time we went into one of these shops, you got a different product. We must have shipped 80,000 to the natives of Africa...But at least it worked and we did a hell of a job...We made the WAVES and the Marines and I made the WAFS, the air force. And I had fun. I loved it.

Q: Did that become the principal part of your business during those years?

A: Well, in those years it was.

Q: You had all the fabric you wanted, obviously.
A: In all the years that I worked for the government, I never had...I was never renegotiated. I worked on...what did I get? I got three and something percentage for myself...So...

Q: That was a cost plus...? 

A: Yes...And I never renegotiated. Of course, they had the right to do that. And we shipped a hell of a lot...thousands and thousands of uniforms. But it was fun. I enjoyed every minute of it, because I felt I owed it to America...and I enjoyed doing it.

Q: I never heard that story.

A: Oh, sure. Sure. Well, I made so many things that I wouldn't let my name be associated with. For example, remember Alvin Handmacher... I made all his Marine uniforms. He never made them; he couldn't make them. And I made them. But Alvin paid through the nose. I loved it. I had such fun with that bastard. He paid me so much money...that it was really enjoyable.

But that went on...And when the war was over, Amalgamated warned me that International wouldn't let me work anymore. when there's no war. When war was on, nobody said a word to me, but when the war was over they came to see me, and said I had to shut down, which we did, and then I really had fun. I wanted to finish up all the fabric we had and so forth, so I sold it all to friends of mine in the retail business, like...Remember Bernie Rosenberg, with Consolidated Stores...all those kinds of guys. Gus Adler at the Higbee and stores....They had to buy it all sight unseen and at my price. Which they all did, by the way. And I shipped them all...I made them up into little tailored suits and stuff like that...

Q: And they were still sufficiently in need of merchandise so
that they were glad to get it..

A: Yeah. And I had a wonderful low price because we had a section work shop. We had a shop on 4th Street and Broadway, downtown, that a partner ran.

Q: Well now, when that business was over, and you resumed doing what you had been doing before, did you have any problems re-establishing yourself with your retailers?

A: No, no, no. They all knew... We had been working during the war, but I worked harder at my own business than I did the government thing... But eventually it all came about that the unions just took over... They couldn't... You couldn't live with the union. Which, by the way... When I went out of business, there was a fellow by the name of Henoch Mendelsund.

Q: Yes. He's still there. He's in charge of the archives....

A: Well, he's a wonderful guy. He said to me one day, (we were very good friends), "I just wanted you to know that I cannot control your people." So I said, "Henoch, that's wonderful. I'm glad you told me." So I went back and I called a meeting and I said, "I just wanted to tell you boys that Mr. Mendelsund...

Q: This is the meeting of the workers?

A: My workers. He couldn't control them. And he was the head of the union. Because my workers were the old workers of the industry, you see. They couldn't produce, and they wanted more money and not produce. So I told them, the next time I had an unwarranted stoppage, anywhere, I would go out of business. and about three or four months later, I had to stop... And that's what happened to the whole coat business.
Q: Were you ever affected by the fact that the coat business was a cyclical one... You had months where you were very busy, and months where you weren't.

A: We... Actually, our spring business was much better than our fall business.

Q: Really.

A: Yeah. Because we used to do a big suit business. And there was always a big coat business in spring. Light weight coats.

Q: You weren't in rainwear at all?

A: No. The rainwear didn't really... It came on a little later. We should have been in rainwear, but by that time, we had started to think in terms of closing up... But the spring coat business, as such, was always fairly good but the suit business was tremendous.

Q: What was your price range, at the time that you closed up?

A: When we closed up we were from $69 to...

Q: Wholesale?

A: Yeah... To $125. But they've gotten much higher than that.

Q: What was your sales promotion effort during these years that you were in your own business? Did you advertise? Did you...?

A: We... We did shows. We worked very hard at... We spent little in advertising, and we did pretty well. But there never was really enough money spent to advertise. But the name was very well known, and it was mostly with the shows that we did around the country.

Q: You did? You did... I mean, when did you start doing the shows around the country? Now, you're talking about trunk shows. You're not
talking about local markets.

A: Trunk shows. All trunk shows. All sales. But it went right on... In fact...

Q: Who went out with the shows? A sales person...?

A: Well, I used to have... We had a girl go out with them. I used to meet her or something, at some of these places. But we had it organized as such, and it always went pretty well. But I also would not let them... They had to buy enough merchandise to have a show in their store.

Q: Yes, because you had said earlier, in the other, when we were talking about Rentner, that it was really....

A: Because otherwise they would take advantage of you. Like... There's a friend of mine today... Murray Sorem. I don't know if you know him...

Q: Yes, I do.

A: Well, Pat Sorem is in the dress business...

Q: Pat Murray...

A: Pat Murray... Exactly... When she does these shows, they buy no goods from her. She goes and sells the goods for them... So I said to her, "There's no point in that. It's stupid." But she just does it as a hobby. Have you ever seen her merchandise?

Q: Yes.

A: What does it look like?

Q: She does very dressy clothes. .. Arthur, if you were to advise a young person who came to you today, and wanted... A young person who wants to get into business, in some way, what would your recommendations be?
A: Well, I think the most important thing would be for these young people to get a little experience in the business, like, going to a school like F.I.T. and going to a few of their courses. And then taking an apprenticeship with some of the manufacturers in town today... and working for a few years and then grow from there. Because you cannot start any other way in this business today, except by learning what it is. It's a very intricate business, and it's very capital intensive. You have to have lots of money. Well, if you don't have a background and lots of money, how can you go into business? You have to start and learn. So if you go to school, and they learn from F.I.T. (and they have some wonderful courses there), then they go and work for some manufacturer, and diligently build themselves up. Then they can do it. And I think the youth today, as far as the apparel business is concerned, are too anxious for success without putting enough time into really earning it. And it takes long hours of diligent work, but it can still be done. And that's the only way it can be done.

Q: How much capital do you think it takes nowadays, to open even a small business.

A: Oh, it takes hundreds of thousands of dollars. Because... before you turn around, your capital is gone. The banks today, with the high rate of interest... don't loan money readily, because they can't make money with that kind of... If you've got to pay 19% for money, you're lucky if you make 19% on any business. So it takes a lot of money today to operate, but that never stopped the American way. You still have to know it, but it still can be done.

Q: Could you just mention a few of the expenses that you might
have to look forward to, in the first, say, three or four months of operation, in the apparel field?

A: Well.. In the apparel field today, the greatest expense is rent. When I first started, we paid nothing for rent. Today there isn't any kind of a loft in New York City that you could get for a reasonable rate. They're all getting $15 to $30 a sq. ft. So rent is very expensive. Then people...Salaries are very expensive today. The average bus driver gets what? $300 a week? What should a technician get in the apparel trades? Well, they get a lot of money today. So, between salaries and rent...

Q: And fabric....

A: Besides fabric. Because fabric...There is no such thing as cheap fabric anymore. Everybody wants a pound of flesh for their fabrics. The $2 fabrics are $8 today. So before you turn around, the costs are so high, that it's difficult to make a profit. And then when you have to pay for money at that kind of a rate, you haven't got a chance. That's why a lot of these young designers, who originate their things and they work in the lofts in Soho and so forth....They're just living hand to mouth. But if you want to form a business, you have to be experienced, and you have to have capital, and it's difficult, in today's system.

Q: But it can be done.

A: Of course it can. There's always a way.

Q: Thank you.
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

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