The Oral History Library
of
The Fashion Institute of Technology

LEE TRAUB

The Bloomingdale Interviews
by Estelle Ellis
Q. ...The critical corporate year for me is the man, the merchant, the citizen of the world...
A. Hmmm...Okay. Obviously, I'm not going to speak about the merchant. And I'm not going to speak very much about the man of the world. I'm going to speak about the man.

Last Friday Channel...CNN was here televising him for this Pinnacle program.
Q. Tell me about that.

A. They do a half hour on an executive...Outstanding people, who have been....Mostly business executives. Maybe all business executives. And the interviewer--a man by the name of Tom Cassidy--said to me, after Marvin left, he was amazed. He said, "You know, in talking to people, and in gathering together some kind of feeling about the man (because you did the same thing when you did talk to him)," he said, "His humanity...You don't know what kind of person he is." And I think saw him...saw it...Talking about a number of things, he saw a side of Marvin that people don't usually see.

Which sometimes distresses me a little bit, because I really get tired hearing all the time about what a wonderful business person he is, and how creative he is, and what he did...Because most people don't know what kind of human being he is. I mean, we've been married for 38 years...
Q. So much of his life is involved with his business,
and the people who talk with him and to him are part of his intense business life.

A. And I think he is...I think he has two very different sides. I think a lot of people are intimidated by him in business, so they think he's a very difficult man, a very severe man, and he really isn't at all. He's a very loving, gentle, affectionate man. We've had 38 wonderful years together. Not many people can say that. He's very compassionate. But that...I think people in business find that out too. If they have problems. And he's very concerned about the kids. He's a very loving father.

And, aside from all those wonderful, very personal traits—that I probably appreciate more than anybody else because of his devotion to me—he also...

Q. Well, excuse me. That's also rare. It isn't just 38 years. I have personally met a lot of wives of executives in the retailing business, who have had to go this route of traveling to different cities and the women not being part of that man's life, and it hasn't always been so for them.

A. Well, wherever Marvin goes, he wants me to go with him.

Q. So that's the difference. Would you say that that's one of the differences?

A. It makes an enormous difference. It's an enormous difference.

Q. Don't you observe it in other...I don't necessarily
mean just retailing wives--any kind of wives.
A. No, my husband wants me there all the time. Which
is wonderful. And if I ever think, "I really don't want to
go there," I think, "I'd better go." It's better than...So,
I'm very fortunate. So, if there are times I have to do things
that I'd just as soon not do, I'm happy to do them, because I
realize I'm very lucky to be able to share all this.

I think the other thing that I've always been
very, very proud of is that I can say, unqualifiedly, that
my husband is a gentleman.

Q. You used that word on the telephone, too.
A. I did, didn't I.

Q. Because that was the thing that troubled you about
the sketch.
A. He didn't look like a gentleman. He looked like a
Broadway "shark." I saw something in it that was not my hus-
band.

Q. Did you tell Hirschfeld about that?
A. Yeah.

Q. What was his reaction?
A. Hmm..."You can't please all the people all the
time..." What could he do? What could he say? There was...I
didn't (vocal reaction)...But I'm going to complain about the
noise and I'm going to complain about the smoke...The smoke.
I did it once. They said, "Well, what's the address?" I said,
"I don't know. It's down the street. I don't know the number
of the building."

But he is. He is a gentleman. And he always says that whatever he does, any decision he makes, he wants it to be proper enough to appear on the front page of the New York Times. Someone misunderstood that once and thought he wanted to be on the front page of the New York Times. And I said, "No, no, no, that's not what he means." It's that it can be open to the world. Any business or personal decision. He has an enormous sense of morality. He's very old fashioned...

Q. How has that...Talking in those terms; talking about a time in which business morality and business ethics are really under the microscope, how have you seen this manifested over the years--his growing up years--in this particular corporation? How has it manifested itself?

A. Well, I just know that, you know, there was a case years ago when it was called to the grand jury and there were some indictments, and he knew that he didn't know...I knew too that he didn't have to worry about anything, because...First of all, he's very honest and second of all, he's smart enough to know when you don't do things. And there have been...From time to time he has said to colleagues, "This is not something we should be discussing." You know. "This is not a good idea."

Q. Also, he's working with foreign governments, so he's in an ambassadorial role.

A. Y-e-s. Ye's very particular about, for example, his
employees accepting certain kinds of gifts. And, in 38 years, he has demonstrated that he's a very (?) man.

Q. Give me some sense of him in his growing up years in the business, which you shared. The transition, the change in him, as you observed it.

A. Well, I think...I'm certain the same thing happened to me. As you get older, if you succeed (I don't know about people who don't), but if you succeed, and you perceive yourself as succeeding, you get more self-confidence. And I can certainly see...We were very young when we were married, so I knew him when he was still...Because of the war, his college was...He graduated a year later so he was...And I knew him then. I went to his college graduation. We both graduated college the same year.

Q. Is that where you met?

A. I was at Smith and he was at Harvard, and we met in our senior years.

Q. And you went out together steadily from that point on?

A. Just about.

Q. And this is how many years? This is more than your married years.

A. Well, we met in 1947 and we were married in 1948, so...

Q. So that was fast. Love at first sight.

A. Yes, pretty much.
Q. He wasn't at Bloomingdale's then.
A. No. He went there in 1950.
Q. That's right.
A. But, he certainly has become more self-confident. So have I. And ...He's become more difficult. I can see it. But...We can laugh. I can laugh at him and I'll say things to him...I don't take him too seriously. Because I admire him so much and I love him so much, and I respect him so much and he knows it, but if you talk to him...And this is wonderful for me. He says it so many times: The best decision I ever made was marrying you. And, you know, that's wonderful, if he still says that 38 years later. But the change, I do see that.
Q. What about the pressure? How much of that comes home?
A. None. Very little. Very little. Even in the years...In the late '50s and '60s when our children were growing up, he never would come home and say to one of the children, "Don't bother me now, I have to unwind first." He always came home calm, never brought anything home...He talks about his business to me all the time, but that's different. That's on a very calm, objective level. I said to him a few years ago, when pressures on me...It was one of those weeks when I thought...Ugghh...And I said, "Don't things ever get to be too much for you? When you just feel that it's all too much?" And he said, "No."
Q. There's a tremendous calm. Am I right?
A. Tremendous calm.
Q. Tremendous calm.
A. And a tremendous ability to deal with a thousand different things...
Q. And sort them out.
A. Sort them out. And an ability to deal with problems. And you know that every day he has to have problems; with personnel leaving and not being able to fill this thing. Or serious...All kinds of serious, serious problems, that might drive somebody else up the wall.
Q. So that confidence that you're talking about is real. It isn't... You know... There's two kinds of confidence. There's the confidence that is a layer that covers lack of confidence.
A. No, no...
Q. This is bred out of, number one, is it genetic? Is it career experience? What is it?
A. It's a lot of everything. I mean, I suppose he was that way as a child. He is that way.
Q. This is what I'm trying to determine.
A. And he is able to have 50 balls in the air at once and to deal... He said, no, the reason he doesn't get so uptight is he knows he'll deal with it.
Q. He knows he'll do it.
A. He knows whatever the problem is he'll deal with it, one way or another.
Q. How did this affect the children? You know...There is this...Again, shall we put it down as a cliche? That strong parents do not necessarily become role models for strong children. That, as a matter of fact, when I was growing up, my family, we attended a session, and they said, "You know, the problem is, your children haven't got the mountain to climb that you did, and you're a hard act to follow." How does this affect children. In...You know...You're confident...First of all, you have a loving home. What has it represented to them?

A. I think it's very unusual for children to come out of a loving home where they don't have to fight for things or for affection, for approval; to be really aggressive. And things like that. And I think we have three terrific kids, all of whom are achievers. They're not all like their father, but they're all directed, all three of them. They all have very stable relationships. So, we're very lucky.

Q. You're lucky, and the role model took.

A. Yes. Marvin was a very interesting father. He decided, when the children were quite small, that when we sat down to the dinner table we were going to have a discussion about something. So he assigned the children...Once a week? I don't remember how often we did it...Because in those days we were home a lot...That they should read a newspaper article and the smallest child could read the funnies. He didn't care.
Q. Does he read a lot? Does he read a lot now?
A. Never fiction, or never all the things he'd like to. Publications take all his time...
Q. Magazines....
A. I don't know when the last fiction was. He really doesn't get a chance to read books, which is unfortunate. But they...Whatever they read about in the paper, they would tell us about.
Q. And this created a dialogue...
A. It created a dialogue...We didn't have to discuss...Whatever...Whatever children discuss at the dinner table, if at all. Maybe they don't discuss anything. I know there are a lot of American families that sit down, put some food in their mouths, and get up.
Q. If they're even sitting down together. They're all on a different timetable.
A. This is true. But we always sat down together and we always talked to one another.
Q. You said in those years there was time for you all to get together. When did this begin to change? When did his real...What I call heavy time schedule....
A. Part of it was Bloomingdale's itself, and the world. The world itself. The wives of the younger executives moan and groan when I tell them that (I can't remember the years but) Bloomingdale's used to be closed on Saturdays in the summer. That when I married Marvin, there was the store in...
New York, there was a little store in New Rochelle, there
was one in Long Island, in Fresh Meadows. I think that's all.
It was another world. He worked hard but...We lived in Scars-
dale and he commuted. He came home for dinner every night.
Q. How long did that last?, That lasted for what? Ten
years?
A. Well, at least, because I didn't...It wasn't so
difficult. It wasn't half so difficult for me bringing up
my children as it is now for those women who are married to
those top executives, who have to travel all over the world,
all over the country, all over the world...The store's open
every Saturday all year long and on Sunday afternoons. It's
much more demanding.

Now...Marvin became...Executive Vice President...I'd
better check these dates...In '69, he became Executive Vice
President. In '70 he became President...I guess it was chang-
ing gradually then. I can't say exactly when it changed. It
just happened. And certainly by ten years ago...

Also, when he started all these country promotions,
which have been going on for a long time now, it involved more
travel.

Q. Are you on his timetable?
A. What do you mean?
Q. He tells me he sleeps four hours, and needs very
little sleep. He needs very little sleep, he says.
A. I don't like to contradict my husband, but he
sleeps about six hours.

Q. I don't know that he said four hours. I may have said the line. The important thing is he needs very little sleep.

A. Yes. He needs a lot less than I do.

Q. Did you work in those years? I used to (?)...

A. I worked when we were first married. I love to tell people I worked my way through his first year at business school. Which I did. We were married after his first year at business school. And he was on the GI bill.

Q. You never wanted to work after that?

A. Yes, I did work. I worked until my first child was born.

Q. And then you didn't want to come back. After that.

A. No, I didn't have a career, with a capital "C," work. No. And then I had another child two and a half years later. And in those days...

Q. Oh, it wasn't a mandate.

A. It wasn't a mandate. I was always very happy. I was always very content. I danced. That's been in my life. So I have that escape from the real world. That was a world I could escape into. I was really a very domesticated animal.

Q. Why are you leaving the board? The Martha Graham board.

A. It's a very, very difficult job to do for years and years. I must have a burnout or something. I could no sooner
face another season and another deficit, over which I have no control....My fund raising arm is...

Q. Broken.
A. Broken. Uh huh. It doesn't work.

Q. They won't let you off the hook that easily.
A. Oh, no. I'm still...I plan on working...I'm still very close...I'm very close to those people over there. They're very personable...

Q. Let me ask you this. In terms of your travels (I see you're taking notes, so I'm not going to...), in your travels...Spin off for me some of the experiences that you remember as being very special.

A. Oh!...You know, very often I've felt that I really ought to write an autobiography. The only trouble is, I'd never put anything negative in about anybody, and I don't like the idea of writing a book about all the famous people you've been with. The idea just turns me off.

Q. It could just be a diary of a president's wife.
A. But then you have to (?)... because I have had some of the most extraordinary experiences with my husband. I think the first really knockout one was when we...You know, we're very interested in India. We went there in 1966 for the first time, and I came back...I was cooking Indian food, I started to study "baharatanatayam," which is the temple dance of South India. It was total..

Q. Cultural immersion.
A. Yes. I mean, I really felt...My Indian friends are convinced that I'm a reincarnation.

Then we went back, a few years later. By then we had become very friendly with the ambassador from India, and he had gone back to India, after a spell here as ambassador, as governor of "Maharashi" state, of which Bombay is the capital.

Q. We're sitting up a school there, an F.I.T. school, a whole work training program.

A. Oh, really? I know the one in India that Ruth Rabb was so involved in.

Q. In Italy.

A. In Italy. But I didn't know you were doing something in India. In Bombay?

Q. Yes. Marvin knows about it. We talked about it at our meeting.

A. So..."Ali 'Abajong," when he heard we were coming to India, said, "You must stay (he was the governor then) in what's called 'rajpavan,'" which means...house...Every governor lives in a large "pavan." And we checked...And both of us were terrified they were going to unpack our luggage for us, because we had been traveling all over the Orient. A wan, liveried servant picked us up at the airport. I remember I had a package wrapped in paper and the tape was coming off and the string was coming off...We looked like two vagrants.

We arrived at the palace, and it's a palace! We
requested that they not unpack our luggage. We had a lovely room—in this magnificent building—When you drive in there's somebody to...But that I've gotten accustomed to. That happens in a lot of embassies; it just seemed grander in India. Two men slept outside our room at night, on the floor, which is what they do. When we dined, we were served by wonderful... There were two of them...Tall, slim men in white uniforms with big red belts and gold emblazoned on the belt. Their heads wrapped with red turbans with a thing emblazoned and white gloves, and bare feet!

Well, it was like this, for the several days...We made a side trip to one of the most famous...I should say, one of the most extraordinary places in India. .. (?).. And the car drove us up on the tarmac to the plane. We didn't go into the airport at all. We drove out, parked the car at the bottom of the steps, and the servant took my little overnight bag, which was very small, carried it in front of me, marched me to the front of the plane...And I said to my husband, "I do believe at this moment I am royalty." It was that kind of extraordinary experience. That not too many people have.

I said to Marvin...I become overwhelmed with my good fortune. I think I am probably one of the luckiest human beings in this world, and I don't say that hollowly. I mean it, very seriously. There are very few people who are as fortunate as I am. And I said sometimes I don't know what I did to deserve all this. I've got him, and my life, and everything else.
Q. Tell us about France, this last trip.
A. That was another extraordinary experience. Marvin made it so. That is the thing, I think, about my husband. There are lots of heads of stores, there are lots of heads of businesses, there are lots of people who succeed, but he has made all these things happen; his international quality.
Q. Talk about that.
A. He did himself.....
Q. Talk about that.
A. ...In his very quiet way...He is not at all shy.
And I think the first time, for example, he called on an ambassador was in 1966, when we went to India, we went also to Japan, we went all over the Orient. And he called on (?) because Barbara D'Arcy was doing this wonderful Japanese kitchen, and they needed...I think an old Japanese building or something, and he went to see (?) .. to see if he could help him do that. And since then we have gotten to know dozens of ambassadors, some have become very good friends of ours. Which gives you a marvelous entree into a country. And he has never hesitated to invite people, or to have dinner with them, or to establish a relationship. And it's wonderful. It has enriched our lives...
Q. There is that confidence, but also the cultural curiosity.
A. Yes.
Q. And the intelligence. The intelligence to know that
these people need him as he needs them.
A. Oh, absolutely. And he has that sense, you know? He has that quality about him. Well, he has that statesmanlike thing.
Q. Tell us about France, because I heard a little...
A. When he found out that he was getting the "legion d'honneur"--the legion of honor--that they might present it to him, he decided first we should take all the children. Then he mentioned it to some close friends, and they said, "We'd like to come. We're going to be in Europe; we'll change our program a little bit." So, by the time we got there, we had all our children, plus our granddaughter, who was...I don't remember how old she was then...Eight people from the States--three couples who are very close friends and my husband's uncle, who's a very...He's more than an uncle; he's just a very, very dear friend. A couple came from Zurich, we're very dear friends of them, whom we don't see enough. We really do have close friends all over the world. Another couple, New Yorkers living in Hong Kong who were in Europe at the time. She had driven seven hours and changed her clothes in the car because there was a general strike the day of the presentation. And then we have very close friends in Paris. We went on a trip with five of them in the spring to Normandy. Marvin went back to the scene of...He was wounded...That's another whole story about my husband. And...I call them "le clique"--the team--seven of us--dear, dear friends--in a Volkswagen bus, went all over Normandy for
five days. So they all came. And it was five days of...We
gave a luncheon in the country, other friends gave a wonder-
ful dinner. Other friends gave another wonderful dinner.
Q. So life is joyful. You're saying life is joyful.
This portrait of business success not equalling not only family
stability, but the joyfulness that you're sharing...
A. Oh, absolutely. Thank God I have the energy. One of
my very dear friends said to me, "Did it ever occur to you
that he's trying to kill you?" Because most people look at
us and they don't...
Q. That's a mean shot lady!
A. No, she can say things like that...
Q. I'm sorry. That's really a mean shot!
A. No, not from here. I love her very much and..You
know...But...I mean, people are bug-eyed when they...He has
energy that is incredible, and it's mental energy too. Nothing
is too much to take on. And I'm trying to keep up...I'm running
all the time to keep up with him.

Someone asked me, "Where did you get all this energy?"
Well, I never thought of myself as being terribly energetic.
I think you learn. I think you can learn to do almost anything.
Q. You've then done more than share his life. You've
experienced it with him.
A. Oh, absolutely. Yes.
Q. What else should we know, that's important from your
point of view? I mean...
A. I would like just briefly to mention (and I think it's typical of Marvin): He was wounded in World War II. He was shot right through the thigh. His femur was shattered and he was in the hospital with osteomyelitis for a year. Were it not for the penicillin, I don't think he'd be alive today.

He got out of the hospital and he was in a very bad... They wanted to fuse his knee, and an outside doctor who was transferred in said no, don't fuse it. So when he got out of the hospital he went back to Harvard, and he had therapy every day. One leg is an inch and a half shorter than the other. He has a built-up shoe. Most people don't realize it. I dated a boy when I was at Smith who had a very similar... About the same age, maybe... And he limped when he walked. Marvin, at some point—consciously or unconsciously—made a decision that he was not going to limp. And he doesn't. Determination.

Q. That's the end of the story as far as I'm concerned. Unless you want to add a postscript, I think that's a grand climax to the interview. HE DOESN'T LIMP! Because he doesn't want to limp.

A. He wasn't going to.

Q. I had a business man... A lawyer... Who had a stroke, at a late stage of his life. Also a man, very much like you've just described Marvin is. And I remember that when we went to visit him when he was recuperating, we drove up to (they had a little place in Westchester, for the summer; because they
also lived here at Sutton Plaza)... You may know them. The Emils. Alan Emil?

A. Oh, sure.

Q. Well, do you remember Alan Emil? Do you remember the determination. We remember... This picture of him will never go out of my mind: His walking up that... Practicing... Walking up that street. And when they gave him the Picasso, the sculpture, he had just gotten out of the hospital. He walked up—He couldn't even speak—But he walked up to that pedestal and he walked...

A. Yes. You see it... Fortunately you see a lot of that kind of determination that makes the difference.

Q. Uh huh. Fine. I won't take any more of your time. Thank you.

A. You're very welcome.
Transcripts housed in Special Collections:

1. No photocopying without written permission from the oral author or his designee. The Director of the Library will furnish addresses; the reader must write for permissions.

2. Written permission is needed to cite or quote from a transcript for publication. The user must send the Library Director the pertinent pages of final draft; the Director will assist in obtaining the final permission. The form of citation normally used is: "The Reminiscences of ________, (dates), pages ________, in the Oral History Collection of The Fashion Institute of Technology." No fees will be charged for published use. User is asked to furnish Oral History Program with a copy of the published work.

3. In order to see PERMISSION REQUIRED or CLOSED memoirs, the reader must obtain the written permission of the oral author or his designee. Contact the Library Director for addresses. The reader writes for permissions. Written permission if obtained must be presented when the reader visits.

4. TAPES
If a reader would like to hear a sample of a tape, he must contact the Library Director, who will screen the portions to be heard. No tapes will be heard in their entirety.