ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

MEMOIRS OF

MAURICE RENTNER

FROM VARYING PERSPECTIVES

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

INTERVIEW WITH

BERNICE RENTNER JABLOW

Daughter of Maurice Rentner

DATES OF INTERVIEW

Tuesday, May 11, 1982
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INTERVIEWED BY

Mildred Finger
Q: Bernice, your father has been called "The Dean of the Industry," and certainly was a Titan, of any industry, that he might have been identified with. Can you tell me about your family? The kinds of things that happened as you were growing up with your brother and sister and your parents, and where you lived, and how your life was affected by what he was doing in his business?

A: Well, his business and his home life were very separate. We were never involved in his business. It was sort of a closed door when he came home. His family was a very private thing. And I can only...I didn't know very much about his business life, certainly not as a child. I can only recall over the years that I've heard anecdotes, or funny little stories from various people, about my father. As I go along, maybe I'll remember them a little more clearly, or things will come back to me. Do you really want to know what I think, possibly, about him, or how I remember him?

I remember him as a perfectionist. I remember him as a person of great dignity and...I'm searching for a word...to best describe him.... He loved people. He was very, shall I say, demanding in everything, in his home life, certainly, and as far as children were concerned. I can even remember when my children were small, he would expect them to be perfectly mannered at all times, which they were. They had to be particularly with him. He used to take them out to lunch on Sunday. I remember him scolding one of them terribly one Sunday because he hadn't risen when some person came over to the table.

Q: He has been talked about as somebody who had great taste. And I know that you can't identify...talk about the taste with regard to his
business, but then he had a great sense of taste, of quality....Was that ex­pressed at all in any of his activities at home? Was he a creative person at home?

A: Oh, yes. Certainly. He was very critical. As I said, he was a perfectionist. That was number one. He was very critical about every­thing. I don't think I would dare walk into my parents' home unless every hair were in place. Because you'd sort of be surveyed. This is really...This is the truth. He just expected you to look like a band box at all times. My father's home was perfect at all times.

Q: Did he have any creative skills? Was he in any way an artist, a painter, or any of those things?

A: He wasn't a painter, but he was a collector. He adored por­celains and paintings and antiques, and if you had ever been in his home you would have seen this. Mother and Daddy traveled a great deal, and he never came home without something he had discovered and just something he loved he would buy and bring home. And he was always discovering people in the same way. He...I hear stories about people whom he had put into business or helped with busi­ness, because he would pick people up, he had an instinct, he could see some­thing in a person, and help them along in their field of endeavor.

Q: There were other members of his family who were involved in the ready-to-wear business.

A: Oh, he put everybody in business. And...he created a niche for everybody, whether they worked for him or whether they...My aunt, Mrs. Miller...Daddy contributed...saw that...helped, because he was the patriarch of the family. And...You asked me another question....
Q: And his brother. His half-brother, Ira....
A: Yes...

Q: They had the same father but different mothers.
A: That's right. Yes. My grandfather remarried at a very early age. I guess my father and his other sister were very, very small when he remarried, and they had two more children.

Q: How are the Siegenfelds related?
A: Those were cousins. That was an older sister. And he gave everybody jobs. Brought them into...You know, brought them into the industry.

Q: Herman Siegenfeld, for instance, was involved very early...
A: Yes, he was employed...Daddy...There were several boys in that family, and he gave them all jobs, and Herman stayed there. A lot of them went on to different things, but Herman did stay there, with Daddy, until he died.

Q: Now, in the most recent issue of "Avenue," which you've just shown me, there was a story on Martha Phillips. Now, is that...
A: That's fairly typical. I'm always bumping into people, and when they find out my name was Rentner, I hear these stories all the time. But Martha apparently worked for Daddy, I believe as a model or something like that, and she was very, very anxious. The story goes that her desire, her ambition was to own a blue fox jacket. This was the pinnacle of success. And this was quite a struggle for her. And apparently Daddy had bought her this jacket, or helped to buy her this jacket, and she'll never forget it. Martha went on to become "the great Martha," as everybody knows. Well, one of the
funniest stories I ever heard was when... He was very young when he went into business. He was about 19, and I think.... I remember, after his death there were many stories that came out that he had... In order to get a job he had to pretend to be much older; or, to get certain working papers. And there was always a mixup about his actual age. It got to be very, very confusing after a while, because, I guess, legally, he wasn't allowed to do certain things because he was too young, and he was very small in stature.

Q: Which made him look even younger.

A: Made him look even younger. So that he would have to lie about his age. But, one of the stories I did hear was that when he first went into business for himself, he was very anxious to get the top accounts in the United States. And he had Marshall Fields and Magnins. Both came in to see him at different times, and neither was interested. Because he was brand new in the industry. So he concocted the idea of writing out orders for each of these stores, and deliberately misplacing them, and in the wrong envelopes, sent the Marshall Fields order to Magnins, and the Magnin order to Marshall Fields, and the minute they found that this other great company was interested in purchasing a very healthy order, they immediately came in, and Daddy claimed that was the beginning of his success. From then on, he was made, because he had landed these huge accounts.

I keep bumping into people all the time who say he had been responsible, helping...

Q: Buyers and...

A: Buyers,... People in the industry. Even people out of the industry, in other fields; that they had known him or met him, whether it was
in the fashion industry, or whether it was something to do with jewelry, or a shop, or in the art world. He did have an instinct for things, and he had an instinct for people. I guess he could sort of speak to someone and appreciate their talents, you know, and could see they had talents to develop.

Q: Tell us about his relationship with Louis Nizer, who sent your mother a most extraordinary letter at the time of your father's death.

A: Well, they had a very unusual relationship. I don't remember under what circumstances they met, but they became very close friends, over many, many years, and this is way back when Louis Nizer was an unknown. Now, he is certainly a very important figure, And, again, Daddy saw the potential in somebody; that he was a brilliant man. Louis wrote a letter, after Daddy died, which he...I really think he sums up his career in a wonderful, beautifully articulate fashion, I can quote some paragraphs, "He loved beauty, Most people do, in one way or another. With Maurice, it was the essential ingredient to his personality, It affected everything he did. He loved...He could look at a beautiful sunset, or a painting, or beautiful flowers, or beautiful women. He didn't like anything ugly. He would deliberately avoid something that was ugly or unattractive. His..." I can quote from this letter that Louis Nizer wrote: "The mystery of his achievements [he's talking about my father] can only be understood in terms of the artist who's bound by no rules, violates the accepted standards, and draws new beauty from his inner resources of imagination. When this process occurs often enough, we express our wonderment by saying that such a man is a genius. In this sense, and in his field, Maurice was a genius."

Q: Now, those are very interesting points for a lawyer to have
made in a letter. You do feel that his philosophy about how a woman should
dress was very important to him.

A: Yes, because, contrary to today's notions of fashion, I
often heard him express the thought that women should not be bound by fashion.
Each woman should create...dress according to what was best for her. She should
express herself. And if it was becoming, fine. And if it wasn't, that was it.
Just to follow fads and fashions, which so many people do, was all wrong. A
woman's clothing should frame the woman. You've also heard that expression
that a dress or a beautiful outfit is walking away with the person; you don't
see the person, And Daddy felt very strongly against that. He said a dress or
a suit, or whatever it was, should be a picture frame, and express the picture,
which is the person that wears the clothes. I don't think I've expressed it very
well, but that's the general idea.

Q: Did he ever, to your knowledge, go out into the stores? Or
is this before the day of the trunk show? Did he have much contact with the
ultimate consumer?

A: I really wouldn't know. Really, so much of his business was
kept so private. Or, rather, we were kept so isolated,

Q: Did you ever go with him on any of his trips to Europe?

A: When we went to Europe we would meet him, very often, in
Europe, but it was always traveling. Never in business. Occasionally, I met some
people, who, you know, were in business, when I was older. But we were always
segregated from the industry. It was completely a separate thing,

Q: How did you meet your husband, who was in the industry?

In a way unrelated?

A: Absolutely unrelated. As a matter of fact, I always...
felt that, because there were so many problems in the industry, because I remember my father going through all these difficult times with the unions and the Fashion Originators' Guild, and all the things that happened. And I had always said, "Good Lord, I would never want to marry a man who's involved in all this nightmare." And I met Arthur socially; it couldn't have been more removed from the industry. It had nothing to do with it.

Q: You mentioned the Fashion Originators' Guild. Did you know something about the role of that in your father's....

A: Well, I knew a little bit about it, only insofar as it took up so much of his time and thinking. He had great respect for people with original ideas. He hated the piracy that was occurring in the industry, where beautiful clothes and fabrics and designs and ideas were "knocked off." That was the favorite expression. Sold and peddled around, you know, for any amount of money. And he felt it was very unfair to people who were creative and innovators not to be protected in some way, shape or form. He started this idea, of the Fashion Originators' Guild, and the reason I knew about it was that it was so time consuming. He was away from home nights and nights, and it went on for ages, until it was finally formed, until he thought he'd got enough people in the industry to join together. Everybody was out for himself, but nobody wanted to be unified.

Q: Well, this is still a very individualistic kind of....

A: That's right. And he finally got...I don't know how many people were in it,...The top representatives in the industry, to join together, and they did form The Fashion Originators' Guild, and in the beginning, you know, the idea was very successful; it was for the protection of the people
in the industry. And then, you know the story better than I do as to what happened to it. It was a legal problem.

Q: Yes. It was thrown out as being an organization in restraint of trade.

A: That's right. And it had been...And this was also...I remember hearing about this because there was so much publicity about it. And so often we would be somewhere, and be introduced to someone, and a lady would come up to my father and say, "Mr. Rentner, I have a suit of yours," or, "a dress of yours, and I bought it five years ago...," or seven years ago, and, "I'm still wearing it now, It's my most favorite." And Daddy would say, "That's the nicest compliment you could pay me." Because anything of quality should last a very long time. And if it can only be worn for one month or one season, it has no value, And that's the nicest thing he could say. And I've heard that from people many, many times. And I know he really meant it very, very sincerely, And I think that's true today. Anything of quality endures for a very long time.

Q: Yes, Unfortunately, the quality isn't the same today as it was in your father's,...

A: It doesn't exist, you know,

[Side 2]

Q: Bernice, when we talked last, you said there were some other things that you thought you'd like a chance to think about...and I wonder if you could just talk about some of the things you might have left out last time,

Q: Well, you suggested that you wanted some personal
reminiscenses of my father. And I've been thinking about little anecdotes regarding him. Because I thought that might be of more interest...as regarding his personality as a human being. You know he loved flowers and plants, and they had a lovely terrace at their apartment, and he used to spend...He had an office, really, on his terrace. His secretary would come up every morning, and he would conduct most of his business on the terrace, because he just loved being outdoors, from spring to fall, while the weather was balmy enough. He would never go down to his office until very, very late.

I can tell you a lot of funny little stories about Daddy, if you think this would be interesting.

Q: Well, one of the things you just started to mention, was this thing about an alumni club.

Q: Oh, yes. First of all, he loved young people. He adored young people. He was always interested not only in our children, but the friends of our children, and he was always giving them advice, and starting them up in all kinds of endeavors. He would always listen to everybody's problems. And there are so many people who started out with him, in the showroom, shipping clerks,...There was a young man, I remember. A shipping clerk, who was a very young boy, And I remember meeting him just a few years ago, He eventually went into business for himself, and he always said Daddy gave him a push. Gave him advice. He was always introducing people to other people to arrange setups for them and encourage them and...This was almost one of his hobbies. I remember once, a number of years ago, my sister and I bumped into someone who was reminiscing about Daddy, and she said we really ought to establish an alumni club; all the people who originally worked for Maurice Rentner and who went
on to other fields. He took great pride in doing this.

Q: Who are some of those people?

A: Well, you take someone like Mildred Klare, who was a very successful buyer, I have to... You know... Give this a little thought. There was Lillian Sloan, who went into business for herself. I know... I can remember this as a child, hearing stories about how he put her... How he set her up in business, and she did at one time have an enormously successful specialty shop on Madison Avenue, and gained an enormous reputation as Lillian Sloan. And he always took a great interest in everybody.

Q: And you mentioned, also, Martha...

A: Oh, yes. Martha worked, I think, as a model. I'm not exactly sure. I don't remember her, but I remember hearing from Martha, I guess, at some point in time, that this was how she had started out. And who else? This young man, who worked, as I said, in what they called the "silk department." This was where he was in charge of all the fabrics. Who else? I just can't even think of the names of people. Very often buyers,... You'll be traveling somewhere and meet someone, whom I don't know, and they will say, "Well, I worked for your father, way back when, and it was his advice that suggested I do this and this and that and that, and he was right. And that's why I'm in the position I am today." And this was the most exciting thing you could go back and tell Daddy. And he'd say, "Oh, yes, I was responsible for doing this and..."

Let me see... I started to tell you some of the funny stories I was thinking about. Daddy had two problems. He could never keep track of time and he could never keep track of money. He was always late. No matter
what time he told you to be there, and he'd swear up and down that he was going to meet you, or you were going to meet him, or he would arrive at some place... And he had no time... And by the way, one of his hobbies was collecting watches. He had the most beautiful collection of watches and clocks. All over the apartment. All over the office. And, of course, he never looked at them. This was just a whole... This was one of the family jokes. That he never could tell what time it was because he never looked at the clocks anyway. But he loved them. I remember once... Not once, many times, taking him to the airport to make a plane, and my... This is before I was married... My mother, my sister and I were in the car in front of the office, waiting for Daddy to come down and make the plane. He was supposed to be downstairs... One of us went upstairs to get him and came back with the news, "He's on his way." And many, many minutes went by and he didn't arrive. And finally he did arrive, and there was just a bare, few minutes, perhaps a half hour, to get out to the airport. So, we went out to the airport at top speed, and Daddy said to the Chauffeur, "See if you can't drive a little faster." Which he did. And along comes a motorcycle cop and pulls us over to the curb. Whereupon Daddy got out of the car and explained to the man, to the policeman, that he was making a plane. He showed him the tickets, and the policeman was most sympathetic. He said, "Okay, get back into the car. I'll take care of it." Whereupon we had a siren escort us to the airport. We arrived there about three minutes before plane time. Daddy got out of the car, shook hands with the policeman, said, "Thank you very much." Then the policeman turned around and there's the Chauffeur with a ticket! This is a true story. Absolutely.

His other thing, about never carrying money. My mother would always remember to bring money if we went out someplace, And Daddy would never
let you pick up a check. We would invite him to dinner, when my sister...My sister and her husband...When the six of us would have dinner with...And when it came time for the check, we went through this whole routine. Either Arthur or Billy would say, "Now, look, this time this is on me. I invited you." And Daddy would get furious and indignant and he would say, "When I'm out with my children, I don't want to hear anything further about this. You just forget about it or I will be very, very angry." And he would pretend to be in a big temper. Whereupon he'd start searching through every pocket in his coat--this was a performance that was so funny that we would be hysterical laughing--and then he would say, "Dorothy, did you bring any money?" And mostly she would reach into her bag and pull out some money and hand it to him under the table and he would pay the check. I guess this goes back before the popularity of credit cards. And I remember one night being at the Colony, the six of us. Either Billy or Arthur had made the reservations. We had invited them out to dinner. When it came time for the check he went through this entire routine, and he turned to mother and he said, "Dorothy, where's my money?" And she said, "Oh, I didn't bring any." And thereupon there was a big whisper amongst Billy and Arthur, and they proceeded to pass money under the table to my father, who then paid the check. So that was all right. No one could touch the bill. Isn't it funny, when you think back, what funny little quirks...These were all family jokes.

What other things? Well, I started to tell you about his office, on the terrace, because he adored flowers and he loved being out of doors. He used to have a summer house up in Larchmont, when we were very small, and
we had a gardener that I think was born the day that bricks were laid, or something. He must have been 90 years old when I first knew him. And he was with us Lord knows how long, He had been in this country for I don't know how many years, and he couldn't speak a bare word of English. He was Italian. And it was his garden and his property and his everything else. If you went out to cut a flower you had to first ask Frank's permission. And, Saturday or Sunday, that was the day, you know--weekends, when Daddy was home--he would routinely go down, after breakfast, and he'd say he would have to meet with Frank, and they would proceed to walk around. This house had a beautiful garden and it was quite extensive in the back. Lots of fruit, lots of flowers, lots of vegetables. And Daddy would be gone with Frank about two hours, and he would come back after this long conference and he would say to Mother, "He wants something, But I don't know what he wants, You'd better go talk to him," But this had to be with Daddy first. Then she would say, "Frank, what do you need?" and he would tell her, in one word. And it was, again, a standing joke that he wanted fifty pounds of manure, or something like that. Daddy never got it straight. The jokes that Arthur and Billy used to play on him were absolutely hysterical, because they used to kid him about these things all the time.

Daddy adored both my husband and my sister's husband. They couldn't have been closer if they were his own children, which is really a very unusual situation between a father-in-law and sons-in-law. I think he was closer to my husband and my brother-in-law than he was to us. He just had a remarkable relationship,

Q: What about his relationship...I was going to say, what about
his relationship with the grandchildren?

A: It was fantastic. He adored the grandchildren. They could do no wrong. And if you ever mentioned the name of one of his grandchildren in front of him, I mean, the world stopped turning at that particular point. And he would light up and he would... And they loved him. They had long conferences together. He would take them out for lunch on Sunday. That was another thing that he loved to do. During the winter time, the boys would walk down to his house, and they would walk up to Longchamps on 79th Street, and they'd have lunch there. And then we'd get a report back from one of them about what happened at lunch, And they had a wonderful time. And he just adored them. And my sister's children the same way. He just had a marvelous relationship with the grandchildren.

Q: Was there ever any question of any of them going into the business?

A: No,

Q: Never.

A: Well, my children were too young when he died, and my sister's children..., There was never any question at all, because their interests are so far afield.

Q: And, of course, there were no sons in your generation. No living sons.

A: No. We had a brother who died, at the age of 15, which was a hideous tragedy. He died of mastoid the year before sulfa was used. It was just outrageous, a question of timing, A year later, there would have been no problem.
But...the other stories I wanted to tell you. I started to tell you about the relationship between Arthur [Jablow] and my father. Of course, being in the same industry, they had so much in common. We would be in Paris every summer at about the same time, on business. And one day we were at the Ritz having lunch with some people, at one end of the room, and Daddy walked in with some people and they were sitting across the way. And all of a sudden Arthur calls over the Captain and he writes a little note and he said, "I want you to take this note over to Mr. Rentner at the other end of the room." And the Captain nodded and says, "Certainly," and walked over to the other end of the room and handed him the note, And I said to Arthur, "What did you write in the note?" And he said, "I said to him, 'It's a beautiful day. How about going to the races?'" And we watched the Captain wind his way through the tables, and arrive at Daddy's table, and he read the note and he started to giggle, very quietly. Because he was having this very important business conference with somebody, and he looked up, raised his head and looked up and caught Arthur's eye and he just nodded, like that. He never moved a muscle. He just went like that, and, of course, Arthur broke up. And immediately after lunch, we all met in front of the Ritz and we went to the races.

Q: So he obviously liked to relax and have a good time.

A: Oh! At the drop of a hat! I'll tell you another story about his liking to have a good time. One of his favorite stops was Deauville, when he was in France, and he loved to play chemin de fer.

When he was in Europe...He had a marvelous eye for antiques
and porcelain. There was an old Russian lady who ran an antique porcelain shop. She had marvelous collections, on the Rue St. Honore. I remember her name was Madame Popov, and she must have been, God, I don't know how old, and she would wait for him every summer and she would put away...Put things away for him that she knew he would love, Because he had a wonderful collection of porcelains. I have some of them here; my sister has some of them; and the grandchildren have them. But we've all been immersed in this sort of thing ever since we were children, And he had an eye that was really incredible, because he could see things around corners and across the room, and he could just spot things that a lot of people would miss. And he was always right. And he had such wonderful taste, whether it was in couture or in china or porcelain or silver or paints, it was always remarkable. He just...It was instinctive. It was not anything learned out of a book. He had a wonderful eye, and he used to buy things on his travels, he loved doing that, And then give gifts to his friends, Remarkable things. Every once in a while I'll see something in someone's home and they'll say, "Your father gave it to me,"

Q: What I wanted from you was just what you were giving me. Just those few extra things that flesh out the human being.

A: That's right, They're personal. He was a very fastidious person, as you knew, and he was immaculately groomed at all times. He never could understand anyone who wasn't perfectly groomed. When my children went to visit him they were certainly well dressed. They always wore suits and ties and polished shoes, and...I just can't visualize him in today's world. Nobody ever wearing a tie and women walking around in any old thing, particularly in the summertime, And the dungarees just wouldn't have been for him
at all. It was a whole different era.

Q: He responded to the era, and he helped to create the era too.

A: Exactly. And he was a perfectionist. In everything except time. How he ever kept an appointment or got anywhere...

Q: As a matter of fact, I had already gotten a sense of that from one of the other interviews. Lillian Sloan talked about the first time she was invited by your parents up to the apartment. She told a similar kind of story, about time,

A: He would expect you to be on time, but he would arrive three hours late. I think he always just planned many more things than anybody could possibly do in the course of a day. And if somebody arrived to see him, he would just drop everything and continue. The biggest tragedy in his life, outside of losing his only son (and my sister and I having sons probably compensated for that to an enormous degree), his big personal tragedy was when he lost his voice. That was the most horrible nightmare. He had a throat operation. His vocal cords were removed. And then the fact that he couldn't communicate, or had such great difficulty. It took great, enormous will power in time and effort, to learn how to speak,

Q: Do you remember the year that this happened?

A: His operation? I honestly don't know. I guess you could find out.

Q: But it was several years before he died, I guess.

A: Oh, yes. Probably 10 years before he died. He...

Q: It's interesting. It has not been commented on in any of
the other interviews.

A: Well, because he...There was...After this operation, when he lost his vocal cords, he was then told by the various doctors that you can regain your speech by learning a new method. You have to speak through your diaphragm rather than your vocal cords. And he was not young at this time. He would have the speech therapist I think practically every day, and spend Lord knows how much time learning this, so that he was able to communicate. Of course, his voice was not very strong, and he could not be heard in a large crowd, I mean, if he was in a noisy restaurant, it was a disaster.

He was honored many times at various dinners, and I remember going to one of the last dinners, shortly after this operation, when he was in such a...wasn't able to speak...And he was the guest of honor. He was the recipient of some award, And it was a very large dinner at the Waldorf, and he wrote this speech in the evening and Louis Nizer delivered it for him. And he was upset about this, I think it was the National Jewish Hospital, but I'm not sure.

Q: Thank you very much,
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