For the Oral History Collection

of the

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

an interview with

RALPH LAUREN

Interviewed by:

Mildred Finger

September 5, 1990
Q: For the oral history collection of the Fashion Institute of Technology, this will be an interview with Ralph Lauren. The date is September 5, 1990; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Now, of course, I know a lot about you, having read a lot about you, but regardless of whether I know it or not, if it's interesting I want it on this tape so it will be part of the transcript, which is part of the record.

There were a number of things that were not covered in all those articles, even though they were very comprehensive. For example, during the time that you were growing up and developing a very strong proclivity for the sort of thing you'd like to do and the areas that are of interest to you, were there any role models? Were there any mentors? Did you have any school teachers who impressed you with any--Something to explain how you developed this kind of great taste, and interest in things which are great taste.

A: The only thing I--I don't know. I mean, I think there's--Growing up--I grew up in the '50s, '40s and '40s. I think there's a strong movie influence, there was a strong athletic influence--

Q: Really? How so?

A: Well, because I was very athletic as a kid. I grew up in the Bronx. My house was attached to a schoolyard.
Mickey Mantle, Joe DiMaggio, the New York Knicks (Knickerbockers)—The world of sport was very important to me.

Q: When you were a kid, were you thinking of being a fireman, or a baseball player?
A: I think—I don't know. I think—I didn't know. My father was an artist, he struggled, and I didn't have, really—I didn't quite know. It wasn't promoted—to go to art school and do this—because it seemed like a hard life.

Q: You say your father was an artist. Were your parents born here, or somewhere else?
A: Russia.
Q: They were born in Russia, and they came here—
A: —when he was 16 years old.
Q: They came here when what? I didn't hear that.
A: They were 16. My father was 16.
Q: Oh. Right. Yes. Okay.
A: My father was an artist, loved music and the theatre. Loved a lot of things, but he was struggling. So, I don't know. I think I was inspired by so many things that I don't think—It's not like I had one thing that was—
Q: It's not as though you had a school teacher who said—
A: I didn't have a message that—Well, I did have a—I did like schoolteachers who smoked pipes and had suede elbow patches on their sleeves.
A: I worked for Alexander's. Alexander's while I was in high school.
Q: Yes, I paid attention to that because I have a son who worked in Alexander's--
A: Really? Well, I worked for Alexander's while I was in high school and then I graduated high school and I went to work for Allied Stores when I was 19 years old, and then--
Q: What did you do there?
A: I was a followup/assistant buyer. I was in the buying office in the men's department and did a lot of--
Q: Accidentally the men's department or--?
A: No, I aimed at it. I worked in the men's department, worked in men's suits, furnishings and things like that. It's the kind of job where you start out as an assistant (there's a lot of paper work), and then you go into--Actually, before that I worked for a company called--No, that's right. I worked for Allied Stores and then I went to Brooks Brothers right before the army. I worked there for about six months and then went to--I was selling, just salesman--and then I went to the army for six months.
Q: What year was that?
A: Nineteen-sixty-two or so.
Q: That was the Korean War?
A: That was the Korean War, reserves, yes. Actually, it was right at the Berlin--I went in and it was right when
Kennedy was talking about the Berlin crisis. I got out and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, and I went to work for a glove company called "Weiner's Gloves." It was in business for 100 years and went out of business when I was there. Then I went to another glove company, and then went to a tie company called Rivetz.

Q: Yes, now that was the first time I saw you. That was 1970.

A: Sixty-seven, if I'm not mistaken. I started out as a salesman in the New York office, covering the metropolitan area, and watched them do ties and got ideas and, as simple as that, I said I'd like to do these--

Q: Narrow ties, they weren't the wide ties.

A: No, not wide ties. And they didn't really--I was the--Mr. Rivetz liked me, what I was doing and said, "You're going to be--" He started the company, it was his company, it was in Massachusetts, and they were a very good company that sold to Brooks Brothers. Very traditional, Ivy League. It was the beginning of the Ivy League. And I had ideas and I think Mr. Rivetz loved what I was doing, but he died and his son-in-law took over and I guess they wanted to--They had different discussions.

Q: Were they in this building?

A: No, they were on--They were out of Massachusetts but we rented an office at 10 Park Avenue. So, I learned a little
about ties--how ties are designed--and felt that I had some ideas. Some of the ideas I had I later saw other people do and felt that I really had something to say on my own.

Q: Did you pick the fabrics for his ties?
A: I helped. I did work with Mr. Rivetz and with Mel Creedman, who was his son-in-law, and I helped--I sat in while he was buying and he would ask, "What do you think of this?" It was no formal position in terms of saying "you're a designer." There was no such thing. One day I did ask him, I said, "Mel, I'd like to really--I think I have some ideas," and he said, "Ralph, there's no such thing as a designer in the men's business. We'll always be ready-to-wear." It was true, but I forgot it.

Q: Before I forget--Approximately how many designs of fabric did you work with, for a tie company?
A: I'm not sure what you mean.

Q: Well, when you made ties, obviously, there were not more than a few shapes you could do, right? So, the differences were in fabric.
A: It's fabric and pattern in fabric. There might have been five or six fabrics, but then there might have been 50 designs in the fabrics, so that's where you got your collection. Doing neckties is the most tedious, hardest work of all. The hardest. Because when you're doing a tie, you have to sit down and color it. You have to take one
stripe and you color that in six different colors. Then you take another stripe and color that in six colors, and then take another stripe, and another stripe. It's a very--It's an underrated art and a very creative art that I have learned to appreciate as time has gone by. It gave me my foundation in terms of color and--I don't know. It worked for me.

Anyway, I did feel that I had something to say and my ideas were coming through and I asked this company to let me do it and they thought I was--They didn't really get what I wanted. I did want to do wide ties. I was 25 years old and I was wearing antique ties, I was very energetic and very preppy in a time when people needed guidance and needed direction. The stores needed it. I had a lot of energy. I went looking for another position and persuaded a company called Beau Brummell in Cincinnati, Ohio to let me start a division and they hired me. I started out of a drawer in the Empire State Building. One drawer, in their showroom. One drawer.

Q: In Beau Brummell.
A: In Beau Brummell's, in the Empire State Building. They gave me one drawer and it was my office. I had a phone and a drawer.

Q: And from that you did how much business?
A: I don't know how much business I did there, but they
were very pleased. What I would do was I would go out and find the fabrics. I didn't go to the usual tie people. I went and found odd fabrics--old pieces of whatever; it didn't matter what it was--I made them into ties, I made them into wider ties, and I went to a very quality maker and had the ties handmade and really felt that what was missing was the matching of the ties and quality.

Q: How much did they sell for in those days?
A: The ties? When I started, the Rivetz Company was selling ties for $2.50 and $3.00, at retail.

Q: At retail?
A: At retail. The company called Bronzini, which was a good company, and Christian Dior, were selling ties for $5.00, at the height. That was the retail price. My ties started at $7.50 and went to $12.50. So, what I did was I found a niche that was quality, unusual--neckties that were wider--and what I was feeling was a movement of--Either a combination of old '30s' look--So the wide ties were substantial and we made them into beautiful ties. So it took off--the fabrics, the shape--it caught the imagination of the American public. It was called "Polo," because--I really didn't think of designer names at that point. I didn't think my name was important (I didn't really care about that), but I liked images and the image of polo was--Polo players, in the '30s, were international and European
and very tweedy, so polo inspired me, so I called the sport polo, I called the name "Polo," and added Ralph Lauren as designers started to become more of an influence.

Q: Now, was this your own business then?
A: No, this was--I started for Beau Brummell and they let me start this division and it ended up where I started to sell to Neiman-Marcus and Bloomingdale's and Paul Stuart's in New York. I don't remember the volume of my business, but after about a year--

Q: In those days $1 million was a tremendous volume.
A: Well, they were a very big company, very major. A large, large mass of a company that started out in clip-on bows and clip-on ties. They didn't really understand the business I was in, which was a high-priced line.

Q: They set up a separate sales force.
A: They set up nothing. I bought the fabrics, I started out delivering them by hand myself and packed them--

Q: You cut them?
A: I brought them to a maker in New York City that made Sulka's ties and I delivered to the stores on Saturdays, in a bomber jacket.

Q: Did you sell them to the stores?
A: I sold them and delivered. I flew down to Neiman-Marcus.

Q: You were really an entrepreneur.
A: Yes. I did it all. It's quite amazing, when I think back on it. I don't know if I could do it again, but it was--

Q: It sounds like great training.

A: Well, it was natural--I didn't know I was doing it, how I was doing. I was just doing it. In other words, my thing was unique enough at that time--I guess the fabrication and the width of the ties were very dramatic at that time.

Q: Yes, that sounds very good. So, how long did you go on with Beau Brummell?

A: I think I was with Beau Brummell for about a year and a half, two years, then got some offers, one of which was Norman Hilton. Norman Hilton is a clothing maker in New York City, it's a very good clothing company. At that point I was wanting to expand into more product. I felt that the ties were not enough. I had other ideas for clothing and shirts and he called me one day and asked me if I would like to work for him and I said, no, I'd like to have my own business. He thought about it and lent me $50,000, and that's how "Polo-Ralph Lauren" started. I had the use of the clothing that he made--I made my own clothing--

Q: Now, where was he located?

A: At 1290 Avenue of the Americas. I had the ability at that point--What he offered me was the financing of that, which at that time was $50,000. It wasn't cash, it was just
financial backing and the ability to make suits, and it sort of set me up with a framework, and that took off. In other words, the ties were sort of known, and then when I made the shirts and clothing, I went to Bloomingdale's and Saks and they bought the clothing and they bought the shirts and I just sort of presented a package.

Up until then there was no such thing as multi-products coming out of a menswear company. In other words, there were no designers in menswear. There were women's designers that lent their name, but they were never working for those companies. There was no such thing as a menswear designer who made a collection.

Q: With haberdashery as well as--
A: No. It was like a company; like Hathaway, that made shirts, there was a company like Gant, that made shirts. There was a company like Bronzini that made neckties. No one made shirts and ties and suits and clothing. Maybe someone tried to do shirts and ties, but no one ever really made it, so they were separate products. What I did was make a collection, presented a collection. I think I might have been the first to do that. I don't know if someone started and failed, but I did that.

So, what I now had out--It was Polo-Ralph Lauren Clothing--shirts, ties, suits--a look. My suits had a wide lapel, but they were aimed at the natural-shoulder customer.
Q: Yes, they had the natural shoulders.
A: And what was happening in the natural shoulder business--In other words, I aimed at businesses that were asleep. The men's clothing business was about three-button suits--very Ivy League--and they were sack suits--straight suits. There was no shape, there were no darts in clothing. Brooks Brothers was a good example of the suits. It was called the sack suit, which is now getting popular. I put shape into the clothing, and did an ivy league, or natural shoulder look.

At the same time as I was doing that, the one designer who was coming into view was Pierre Cardin. When Pierre Cardin came in I was probably still in the very early clothes, not well known. Pierre Cardin was a big name, brought in to Bonwit Teller. He was doing very strong, sculptured suits with hard shoulders. That was the European look. Mine was the American traditional look, his was the European look, and that's where we stood in the men's business. The look steadily grew. My look represented the sophisticated, natural shoulder customer--the chairman of the board. Pierre Cardin was the European customer, who wanted a different kind of look in clothes. Then it grew into other designers, other names, other people were jumping in--Hardy Amies. There was a big explosion of names.
Q: And a big explosion of licensing.
A: Yes. Now, I didn't license anything up to then, and then I started my women's business and started to women's pants and shirts. The first thing I did was shirts--men's shirts for women.

Q: Now, Stuart Kreisler wasn't in on that?

A: He was a friend of mine who loved what I did, and was one of the ones who said, "You ought to be in the women's business." When I got into the women's business and started to do the shirts they were then bought by Bloomingdale's, and then they were bought by Saks. That's when I was doing a lot of things all under one roof and found that I was doing too much. I was under-capitalized and ran into some financial tightening, and that was the beginning of licensing for me. I also had started a line called Chaps, which was a lower priced pant line, and I licensed my women's wear to Stuart Kreisler and Chaps to the Greif Company, which was owned by Genesco. So, it is where it stands, where I have my--The women's business, then, was bought from Stuart Chrysler by Biederman of Paris, and my Chaps business is still with the Greif Company, and with Warnaco, making sportswear, and Greif making the clothing. Polo is all under one roof--Polo-Ralph Lauren--is all my company. And then licensing--I've licensed out belts and shoes, hosiery.

Q: That wasn't then, at that period of time.
A: No, that's where I am now. So, where I went from the men's business into the women's business, starting out with the shirts, then doing a whole collection of man's tailored clothes, and then expanding.

Q: Yes. Stuart Kreisler is very interesting. He, at that time, had John Kloss. And I remember very well the circumstances of that.

A: Yes.

Q: And he was the first designer I'd ever heard of who was not working on a salary, but was working on a licensing basis.

A: Licensing, yes.

Q: In that particular way. I mean, other people did licenses, but his was unusual.

A: That's exactly right. Yes. That was the beginning of a whole new breed. It was a whole--there were licenses, there was licensing going on where--

Q: Well, Fruit of the Loom, for example--

A: Well, Pierre Cardin, for example, had licenses all over Europe, and Bill Blass had a license with a men's company. John Weitz had licenses. John Weitz was the original licensing, I think. He had lots of licenses, and Oleg Cassini. They didn't own their own companies, they were licensed. I decided to own my own company and keep it this way. Polo's all under one roof, but I couldn't do
everything. The beauty of licensing was the ability to expand into new products without choking yourself financially; it gave you the ability to say, okay, I can design this women's wear but I can't afford to do it all. I can't grow a company. What I sort of achieved, I think--A lot of these people who started out with licensing lost their business because they were in the controls of other companies that didn't really watch their business the way they did, and they didn't keep it tight, and they were just involved in the distribution. They became over-distributed, they didn't watch their advertising--They had no controls. They just had their name and said, "Okay, here." I think the reason I stayed and my business has grown is that I control the advertising and I control--

Q: The very opposite of you is, of course, Pierre Cardin. He's never controlled anything.
A: Yes. So, that's where the business has gone. Into retailing. I opened my own store.
Q: Yes, that was a very dramatic development, wasn't it?
A: Well, the first time it was with--Jerry Magnin was the gentleman who came to me first and said--I sold stores, but he came to me and said, "I'd like to open a Ralph Lauren store, would you like that?" That was in California. He opened the first Polo-Ralph Lauren store, which has now grown into--
Q: On Rodeo Drive.
A: Right. Which has now grown into a very big store. Then there were other people who came, and I licensed to these other companies, these other people, then I opened my own store. So, this was my first--No, the first store I bought--I had licensed my name to a store in England. I bought the store back from them, then decided to open a store here in New York, and that's--
Q: Did you ever sell to Brown's?
A: Yes, it was Brown's, that was the store. So, that's sort of the origins. Now I have--The company owns--There are 65 or 70 stores now, possibly more. It's international. I own about 20 stores myself.
Q: All right. Now, let's backtrack some considerable distance and talk about your personal life again, okay?
A: Okay.
Q: At what point, for example, did you get married?
A: I got married when I was working for the Rivetz Company.
Q: Making ties.
A: Making ties. I've been married for 25 years and have three children.
Q: And how old are they?
A: My oldest son is 21, I have a son who's 19, and my daughter is 16.
Q: Now, in terms of your family, what kind of a father have you been? I mean, are you interested in what your sons and daughter will be doing, or is it pretty much what they want to do?
A: I think I've been a very--Well, people are under the assumption that if you're in the public eye you don't pay attention to your children. I'm home with my children, I grew up with my children and I watch totally closely, we're a very close-knit family.
Q:
A: Yes, we're a very close family. So, I have the kids go with me everywhere I go. Every vacation, every place we go, we're all together. So it's very close.
Q: The 21-year-old, at this point, is still willing?
A: Absolutely. He sort of, maybe takes a little more time on his own now, but the children were with us all the way through. We have been very close.
Q: What do you think they're going to do?
A: That's a question right now. I think they don't know. I would hope that they get some inspiration on their own and try to do something that is inspiring to them. They do pay attention to my business, they have lots of good ideas. We do talk about things that I'm doing and they have lots of advice and criticism.
Q: Do you think that any of them may want to follow?
A: I think they'd be capable of, maybe not necessarily designing, but I think being involved in this business in some form. Taking it further, maybe.

Q: What does your daughter think of it?
A: Right now she just likes the clothes. Or, she tells me what I should make that I'm not making. But she--No one has seriously talked about being in my business. I think right now they prefer finding their own way.

Q: Are your children in college now, your two sons, I assume?
A: Yes.

Q: And what do they major in?
A: One is the--The 21-year-old is majoring in political science, and the other one--I'm not sure yet. He's just a sophomore, so there's no special major, he's taking general, liberal arts.

Q: The one who's majoring in political science might want to be a lawyer.
A: No, I think he's a big fan of John Kennedy's, and politics are inspiring to him. I'm not quite sure. He's sort of testing the ground, but not--He doesn't feel pressured. I don't think I've pressured him at all. They work under their own pace.

Q: And tell me about your wife. You were married when you were 25?
A: When I was 25, and she was 19. She just wrote a book called *Safari*, did her own book—photography and everything, and brought up the children—

Q: The book with photography called *Safari*, was that done after a trip?
A: Yes, it was done after her trip.

Q: Where'd she go?
A: She went to Africa, and decided to do a book. I sort of said, "Why don't you do a book," and she said, "Okay, I'll do it," so she did the photographs and did the book. She's a very beautiful girl, a very good mother, very sort of behind the scenes. I sort of live a very private life, if I can, or try to. So, basically, she's involved with the children and her husband and taking care of our lives.

Q: What happening with your parents and their feelings about—
A: They're still alive.

Q: They're still alive. How do they feel about you and your business?
A: I think they're very thrilled, very excited. It's been very very nice to have them see it and have them enjoy it.

Q: And to be alive as you've achieved it, is very nice too.
A: Yes.

Q: Okay. Now, let's see. We still have--
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