ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

VERA MAXWELL

FASHION DESIGNER/MANUFACTURER

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

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INTERVIEWED BY

Mildred Finger
Vera Maxwell is one of the U.S.A.'s foremost designers. Starting in the 1920's working for a succession of firms who would not grant her the use of her name on labels, she started her own business in 1947 and has spent many years making collections of beautifully tailored clothes in superb fabrics. She has a faithful clientele, particularly among specialty stores; her clothes have been shown both at the Smithsonian and at the Museum of the City of New York.
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Q: ...for the Oral History Collection of the Fashion Institute of Technology, this will be an interview with Vera Maxwell. It takes place on September 21, 1983. The interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Mrs. Maxwell, you just started to say that you came from a very "reading" family. Would you tell us what you mean by that?

A: It's amusing. I was just telling about somebody who is doing a photographic book of my life, and interested in some old photos I had. I realized myself one was of my grandfather reading to my father. It's a charming picture; I'm sorry I don't have it now. He's got a book on his lap and his two children are standing by his knee. I love the pose, because his fingers are, you know, sort of teaching the children. My father was about nine and his sister was about seven I would say. And strangely enough ...I didn't pick it up, but a friend of mine (Mr. Seymour) picked up a picture of my grandmother, reading to my sister and me and my young cousin. My brother hadn't been born then. And then I have a picture of myself reading to my grandchildren.

Q: And so history repeats itself.

A: Well, we are a ...I wouldn't call it a literary family, but a reading family. We love to read. Everybody in the family loves to read.

Q: Would you start then, as long as we're talking about your family, with where and when you were born and where your parents were born?
A: Well, my mother was born in Cincinnati and my father was born in Bavaria, which was part of Austria at the time. He died in 1924, and my mother died in 1951. And my father was born in that part of Austria, before the take-over of most of Germany by...I guess it was Bismarck. And he came over here to get away, I think...As my grandfather did; my mother's father came away from Europe at the time of Bismarck; the militarism and the iron fist, you know. The Prussians were gathering strength I think. And both my father and my maternal grandfather came to this country...And I would say...My father must have arrived here in the early...Around 1885. My grandfather, of course, arrived here about 1860 and married my grandmother in Cincinnati.

Q: Your grandfather married your grandmother in Cincinnati.

A: My grandfather was born in Germany. Yes. So I have a very Germanic background. It's mostly Austrian, it's either Bavarian or...It's what we call the softer part of the German empire, Bavaria. They're more relaxed. Like our Southerners. More relaxed people.

Q: Do you speak German, by the way?

A: Yes.

Q: Because I know you're a linguist. I know you speak French.

A: Yes. I speak French. But I speak German...My French, of course, is much better now than my German because I haven't used my German much. I used it, as a matter of fact...and my grandchildren were very impressed that I spoke German so well when we got to Salzburg....
Q: This summer.
A: This summer. Yes. I just came back about a month ago. And they said...My granddaughter said....She speaks French beautifully, she's gone to the United Nations School...But she wouldn't open her mouth in France. She says she doesn't like French, she wants to speak German now, and I was so surprised to hear her say that. And she said, "Gram, I didn't know you could speak German!"

Q: And she was impressed. It's nice to be able to impress your children and your grandchildren.
A: Anytime. Your grandchildren especially. But they were very, very good on the trip. I had so many people say, "You're out of your mind, traveling with two teenagers." But they were marvelous.

Q: I have to tell you that I think it's a great compliment that your teenage grandchildren want to travel with you, because it's been my experience that teenagers can't wait to be off on their own.
A: I know. Well, they like being off on their own. I'm glad they're smart enough to know that traveling is an incredibly broadening experience. That's another thing I like to do. I have traveled all of my life, with my parents first.

Q: Could we just go back for a second? When were you born?
A: I was born in the Bronx, in what is now...What do you call it? Apache land?

Q: Something like that.
A: There was a movie.
Q: Fort Apache, I think it was called.
A: Yes. Fort Apache. So it's changed quite a bit.

Q: And you were born in what year?

A: 1901. We lived in a very charming little brownstone house. Believe it or not, there were houses with picket fences near us, that were remnants of farm houses. Was it "Meadow Farms" or something like that? With the little...almost...They used to call them streetcar suburbs in those days. You had the streetcar, later on the elevated, and still later, the subway came up. Then the influx of Irish and Italians and the Rumanians and the...you know, the more Eastern parts of Europe. They flooded over after the subways were built. And then the great tenements were...Then we moved away.

Q: What did your father do? Was he involved in any way in what you selected to do?

A: Well he was...Actually, he came over here...He was riding...He was a Hussar in Franz Joseph's army, which unfortunately was not an army. But I think he was about to marry the wrong woman and they sent him over here to forget her, as families did in those days, and he met my mother and never went back. So they lost a son, actually. We went back, in 1910 I think, we went back to Europe.

Q: But that was just to visit.

A: Just to visit; we never went back to stay. No, I guess it was about 1910. And we stayed...

Q: It was before the First World War.

A: Yes. Sarajevo was about 1913 wasn't it?
Q: Yes it was.
A: I don't think we stayed...My brother was born in 1912, I think.

Q: How many children were you?
A: Three. I have an older sister and a younger brother. My brother's ten years younger. He came much later than I; ten years after I was born.

Q: And your sister is...?
A: My sister's three years older. She's still alive and living in Connecticut. But the area we were born in was charming at the time. Then we moved to Leonia, New Jersey, which was the usual thing to do when I was growing up. They decided there wasn't much in New York. Riverside Drive my mother never liked, when we lived there much later on. We moved from Leonia, where I went to grammar school. And from there we moved to Jersey City, where a very unfortunate thing happened. My father being German, we sat on the front porch singing German lieder. We were surrounded by the Irish, and by that time the war was...the First World War was beginning to raise its ugly head. We had lived quite a while in Leonia, and then we moved to Jersey City. I came home from school one day with my small brother and found the place absolutely ransacked.

Q: How awful.
A: Oh, it was terrible. They had taken all my father's trunks, and they saw his uniform, his Hussar's uniform, and they decided he was a spy and they took him off somewhere. My brother and I were
alone in the house for a while, and my grandmother and my mother came back and the maid, and they were all horrified. And Mother immediately...

She went to New York and she always liked...We had a house in Leonia and we had a house in Jersey City. She always liked real estate. So she went into New York and she found a house on 87th Street off Central Park West and she...We didn't have much money, but she rented it furnished. My father had been in the wine business by this time; he used to teach riding, when he first came over, before he married my mother. He taught riding at the Squadron A to the young children and the young ladies and some of the young men. Then he sold wine; sacristy wine, mostly, because we were Catholic; to the Catholic church. But he was in the wine business, doing quite well, when he was interned. He was not put in a concentration camp, because he wasn't...They weren't quite sure whether he was...

Q: Was he an American citizen at that time?

A: Never. He wouldn't be an American citizen. That was his problem. He said he could never swear allegiance to two people at the same time. I mean, he had sworn allegiance to Franz Joseph of Austria, and he could not swear allegiance to another country. And he suffered for that, and he wouldn't do it. Mother wanted him to. Mother was an American citizen; she was born here. But in any case, he was relegated to stay in Jersey City and he couldn't come across the Hudson; he couldn't leave, as a matter of fact, without enormous papers. And the sad part is they confiscated all his lovely things. He had a beautiful picture of Franz Joseph that I adored, on his horse. Florian,
this beautiful white horse, Florian. And so many beautiful pictures he had of Austria and Vienna, and his uniform, and all these things and his papers were taken. I'm sure my mother could have gotten them back. But, being very resourceful, she did what most women do when confronted with no money and a few children. And grandmother...My aunt was one of the first CPA's; she was an expert accountant and worked for a pharmaceutical house, and made quite a large salary for the day. And I had an aunt and uncle who had just come over from England, Mother started a boarding house.

Q: In New York?
A: Yes. It was enormous; a beautiful house. It had about 14 rooms in it. My sister and I loved it because it was the first time we had ever had our own bedrooms. We each had our own room and we thought that was marvelous. Mother was very hard working and, as I said, very resourceful, and we had a lot of quite nice furniture. And she had this place, furnished, so she went around to some antique dealers and asked to sell some of the furniture that we had--some of it was Biedermeier--and she sold that and one of the antique dealers said, Mrs. Huppé, wouldn't you like to work for us? You seem to know so much about furniture."

Q: I'm sorry. That name is spelled H-u-p-p-é?
A: Yes. With an accent aigu. And she got a job as...not as an interior decorator, that came later, but she did sell antiques for a little antique dealer on Columbus Avenue.

Q: And so she worked for this antique dealer...
A: As well as running the boarding house. I had a lot of work to do myself; I washed a lot of dishes and made a lot of beds after school and then I left...

Q: Before you get to leaving home... You were part of an extended family, as I have gleaned some of the story. That is to say, you had aunts, one of whom had a very interesting experience to relate about the Triangle fire.

A: Oh, that was... earlier. I don't know... The Triangle fire I think was about 1910, wasn't it?

Q: Yes.

A: So I don't know where we were living at the time, but my aunt came home and described the Triangle fire.

Q: Now, was this the aunt who was the CPA?

A: Yes, she was actually working in that district. And that was the maiden aunt who never married. She was much too shy; I don't think she would open her mouth to a man, much less have a flirtation with him. But she was a charming aunt and very cultured. She took us to all the plays we should see...

Q: Did she live with you later, in that house?

A: She lived with us, yes. And my aunt and uncle from England. They came over and lived with us. My uncle, being an Englishman, didn't get along very well with my Austrian father. You know, during the First World War, naturally, they didn't get along very well. But when my father had to stay in Hoboken, he was added to the family. And his wife was there and two children. He was quite a well known news-
paper man at the time...

Q: What was his last name?
A: Bullock. He was known as Fred Bullock in the newspaper trade. In England. The London Daily Mail I think he was correspondent for. An interesting man. My sister worked for him later on when she left high school.

Q: Speaking about high school--Tell us about you and your schooling.
A: Very little. I had a little grammar school education in New York and then I had... I hated the school in New York. It was very dreary. Awful gray walls that they had; green-gray walls and wire stairways. The whole thing reminded me of prison. And then when we got to Leonia it was better. The schools were prettier there and it was country, suburb. We changed schools so often because we moved so often, so I had very little education. My brother... It didn't seem to matter. He was a young genius, I guess. He's now emeritus professor of... He was a Princeton professor of English and English history, and then he went to SUNY, the State University of New York at Harper, and now he's a Professor Emeritus. He was a great Chaucer scholar. He wrote four books on Chaucer. So his lack of going to school didn't bother him at all. That's why I often think that people who worry too much... I do think that what we need in school is the ABC's, the very, very, very fundamental things we should teach. You can go on from there and see what you can learn.

Q: So now, what did you go on to? You had a very few years
of formal schooling...

A: Very few.

Q: But you did go on to study the ballet...

A: I went to ballet class. And I went to high school while I was going to ballet classes. And then I even went to...

When I left high school I got a job with H.K. Brewer, who was a very well known stationer on Madison Avenue and I worked there from 12:00 until 4:00 and then I took a course at Metropolitan Ballet School from 4:00 until 6:00 every day.

Q: So you had a pretty full program then.

A: Well, fortunately for me, by the end of that summer they took me in the ballet, so I had very little ballet training, but evidently I had a good figure. Mostly I think they liked me. They were putting girls in boy's roles in those days. If you were in a ballet like Faust, which was my first ballet, there is a waltz, and the boys and girls waltz together. So the waltzers dressed in boys' clothes--they were all girls. I think I had a boyish figure so I was always doing boy's roles, in the ballet. Later on they did have...I remember the first year before I left they had boys. We didn't like it. They'd be around the stage teasing us and there was the usual contretemps between boys and girls.

Q: How long did you do that? How long were you a ballerina?

A: Three years, I guess. And then I married and had a son. And then I lived back in Jersey for a while in a place called Bogota. It's the town right next to Leonia.
Q: And the man you married was Mr....I don't know his first name.


Q: John Maxwell. Who was in Wall Street. Is that right?

A: Yes. He was a runner on Wall Street. And not very good at keeping jobs, I must say. And looking back on it...I wasn't mature enough to notice it then, but...

Q: Well, you were very young when you were married.

A: I was very young. And he didn't keep jobs very long. He was very independent. And I think...He had two very charming sisters and a very, very...He had a mother who was very Prussian. His father was Irish and his mother was Prussian, and I think that the three women sort of overruled him in everything. He was a very strong man, strangely enough. He always reminded me of Marlon Brando. You know, that very, very...What we call macho now. Very nice man. But after looking for a few jobs, (and I had this one child and I was about to have another), he left for South America. My mother hadn't liked him in the first place and didn't want me to marry him. When he left me, with a second baby coming and a child to take care of, I went to my mother, who still had a house on 87th Street. I went back to her and she said, "Well, you can stay with me, but.." By that time she was working at Altman's in the interior decorating department. By that time she was an interior decorator, and she got a job for me at Altman's.

Q: Oh. So you were a retailer.

A: I was a retailer. Not much of a retailer. I was stock
girl and model at Altman's.

Q: But traditionally that's always been a very good entry level kind of job to have.

A: I learned a lot about fabrics and clothes. No matter where you go you learn a lot.

Q: Was that your first contact with fashion...

A: Well, fashion as such.

Q: I mean fashion as such; as a business.

A: I had no thoughts of fashion at all. I made sketches. In a book a biographer is doing, she has some of my high school sketches. I don't know why I kept them; two little pieces of paper with high school sketches on them. You know how you find things...I put them in a book and I found them and then after 40 years I probably decided to keep them, you know.

Q: So that your first job, in effect, in the fashion world, anyway, was at Altman's and not in the market.

A: No, it wasn't in the market.

Q: How long did you stay with Altman's?

A: Then I...That's not true when I think of it. When I was in the ballet, before I was married, I used to work on Seventh Avenue. My first job was not at B. Altman's. My first job was modeling for Linker and Klein.

Q: Was that Jacques Linker?

A: Yes. Before that, I guess my first job was with William Badger. I was very lucky. I got a job, my first job as a model, walking
over from the Metropolitan Ballet once. We were through in May, and the coat season started in June at that time. Now it's changed a bit. But the fall season started in June, when they were showing coats, and I luckily walked over there just to...William Badger was looking for girls, and I started at the top...He was on the top floor, and I started on the top floor...

Q: Do you remember what building?

A: I think it was 520 Seventh (Avenue) but I'm not sure. But I started at the top and I didn't have to go any further, fortunately, because I walked in and there was a head model there and I said, "I hear you're looking for a model." She looked at me rather disdainfully, as a matter of fact. Because a very good looking blonde walked in after me. And she gave us each a coat to try on and we went out and showed them to Mr. Badger in his booth. It was an enormous place. They had seven booths and five salesmen. And Mr. Badger was very nice--A Scotsman--And I was very lucky to have found the place. He was very nice and he looked at me and he didn't say anything. Two girls walked over to him and walked back and then he said, "Take your coats off."

Q: How old were you then?

A: I was probably 17-18. And so then I walked out and he said, "You!" And I thought he meant the tall blonde, because she was taller than I was and I thought she looked professional. And I didn't even think I deserved the job. And I still walked out. And he said, "No, not you. The girl with the good teeth." So I always thought I must have gotten my...I guess I looked tall because my legs were long.
She may have had short legs, because it's strange, looking at so many girls, modeling, if they have a tall girl come in, and she very short legs, leg line, the clothes don't look nearly as well on her as on a short girl with very, very long legs.

Q: Yes. That coat line. Yes.

A: Very few people realize that. But that was my first job, and I only took that for the summer, then after a while I stayed on.

Q: That was an early lesson in proportion; i.e., short body and long legs makes you look taller. Very interesting.

A: I think you have to be terribly observing in life, and I must have been, even as a child, very observing. I remember coming home from abroad (I was ten when we went abroad) and I remembered seeing soldiers, and I would say to my sister, "Oh, Madeline, remember those marvelous soldiers we saw. They had dark green trousers and short jackets in pink," and she'd say, "You're crazy. We never saw anything like that. I don't remember any of that." And I would say things..."Do you remember the portrait and father said it looked like, I think, the Christ Child." It's in Dresden anyway; in the Dresden museum, in Germany. My sister didn't remeber anything. But she was that much older that she probably didn't...When you're thirteen you start thinking of yourself more. You're more involuted. My sister is a very bright woman, much brighter in some respects than I am. But she never had that either memory or visual contact....

Q: Well, that certainly has been part of what helped to make you the designer you became, because you did notice that kind of
color combination and thought it was unusual and..

A: Some of my most successful... As I had an older sister, I had to wear her cast off clothes, and the coat and the sleeves would always be too long. And Mother probably didn't have time to shorten them, and I loathed them. I'd keep turning the sleeves back and they bothered me because the lining would show. I'd push them up, and I had an absolute fetish about long sleeves. So the first success I had was to design a coat and a suit with a slit on the side and put the fabric in about four inches above the normal line of the slit. And it was very smart...

Q: So if you turned it you would not see the lining.

A: You would not see the lining. Also, I realized that a lot of women have different arm lengths, and to sell wholesale... You know, there were a lot of clothes made by special designers like Hattie Carnegie who made couture clothes. But we were the first designers I guess to do clothes, wholesale clothes for the middle class... Not a rich woman, but a fairly well to do woman and... The middle class woman. And Claire McCardel and Joset Walker and myself, the three that Dorothy Shaver promoted in 1936 and 1937.

Q: Clare Potter too?

A: Clare was the first, as a matter of fact. And we all made clothes. And when I went out, I saw how many women would try things on, and almost all my designing had something to do with the ease of a woman buying it quickly, so she doesn't have to have hems turned up and...

Q: And then wearing it comfortably and for a long time. What
happened after you had been with Badger? You went back to the ballet, I take it.

A: Yes, I went back to the ballet for a while. And I went back to... Well, I married, from the ballet, you know. And, as I say, my son was born in 1924, so I left the ballet in late 1923. I stayed in the ballet for a little while after I was married, and then naturally gave up the ballet when my son was born. Then I was absolutely done with the ballet, and I never went back.

Q: But at that point you did become interested actively and remained interested in your design career?

A: In a way. Not terribly. I mean, I had.... When I took this job at Altman's, through my mother, then I went back to Seventh Avenue and started modeling again, and from modeling I went into designing.

Q: Is that a natural kind of transition, from modeling...?

A: Then it was. Then it was. It's not really a natural transition, but remember, houses were very much smaller. Like the first one I started with, Linker & Klein, made riding habits and ski clothes—not model ski clothes; I don't think ski clothes were even in the picture then, but I modeled riding habits, and that's how Linker & Klein found out about me. And then I went and modeled for them.

Q: Now, how did your first design involvement take place?

A: Oh, by working... You're fitted on... Everything is fitted on you, and I used to complain about the feel of the stiff buckram they used to put in things, and I didn't like the collars, they were too stiff,
and I didn't like the way the cuffs looked and... You just... One way they used me too was they realized I knew a lot about, again, perception. I had traveled when I was a child and I think that they... When they showed tweeds, I said, "That's a terrible plaid. That doesn't match. It's very, very badly..." I saw immediately. Plaid is very difficult to match. If it's a longated plaid and you make a bias cut of it, you can't put it together. It just doesn't fit. And cost is of paramount importance when you're cutting a thousand garments at once. And if the plaid didn't match, and you're a good house, it would be sent back. And they always called me out to look at tweeds and I got to know... As a matter of fact, that happened with William Badger. He used John Barr tweeds, and I got to know a lot about certain tweeds, so when I worked for Linker & Klein, I told them about what houses they should go to for tweeds.

Q: Because you had already learned something about the fabric market.

A: With William Badger, yes. He called me out one time... He had four models and he would call all of us out and I was the only one... At one time I objected to something that he brought out. I think it was a plaid or something, and I said, "Oh, I don't think that's pretty at all, Mr. Badger," and he said, "Well, at least you're.." And the others all said they loved it, you know. And he said, "What don't you like about it?" And I said it had something to do with the colors of the plaid. From that time on he called me out and didn't call the other girls anymore.
Q: So this is really kind of a natural talent that you had, because you had had no training at all.

A: Well, I think it's again a matter of being interested in something. I hated to sit around and do nothing. All the girls in those days, the models were mostly were from Broadway.

Q: They were show girls.

A: They were out of a job. And they would wrap themselves in a coat and lie under the coats, lie under the line, or sit around reading the Daily News when they were not busy. And to me that was a waste of time. Not that I was a goody-goody, but I just liked the idea of involving myself. I was very lucky, one of the girls left Linker & Klein, she was leaving to get married and she gave me a pad and taught me how to sketch. She said, "All they want is a line sketch, and be sure and measure the pockets. That's all they want in the factory. These are not sketches for Vogue or Harper's, but they need this. You'll keep your job if you learn how to sketch." And I was kept, because when I would have been turned away at the end of the season, they kept me on because I was valuable with fabrics...I did swatch books for them; I learned how to paste swatch books up. And I love to do that. I love to put colors together, but I didn't like formation colors. Anybody who knows anything about color...Goethe wrote the famous treatise on color, about one color influencing another. And evidently I had an eye for this, because I would look at colors and I would say, "You can't put those two colors together." And I would do their swatch books for them. And I figured it was just osmosis. You just keep learning more and more.
And using it.

Q: And somebody recognized that you had...

A: Well, I think Ethel Smith, of Abercrombie & Fitch, she was at Best & Company then, was the first one who recognized it.

Q: You dealt with her in the showroom as a model.

A: And she...Yes, as a model. And I also...My first thing that I really designed, I guess, was...They had a lot of odd fabrics around and I...

Q: At Linker & Klein?

A: At Linker & Klein. And I had a piece of grey flannel and made myself a skirt. And they all helped me. They sewed the seams for me and I would do some handwork on it and I'd give it back. They didn't have zippers in those days, and I put the snaps on and...

Q: Did they themselves have a designer full time?

A: Well, no. They didn't have designers. The buyers would come in and demand certain things to be done and I worked with buyers too, so I learned a lot from them as well. Well, Ethel Smith was a buyer at Best & Company, and later on at Abercrombie & Fitch. And she recognized that. She had a small son and my son was a little older than hers, but we used to get together with our children. She had a great feeling for me; she was a charming woman. She had a lovely husband, and we became very, very good friends. But when I went over to see Ethel...and Mary Lewis. Because Ethel Smith was a buyer, but she took me over to see Mary Lewis, who was the vice-president of Best & Company. And I had the riding habit jacket on, I had taken the
rubber out of the back and I put different buttons on it. I think I put brass buttons on it or something...

Q: And it became a daytime costume.

A: And my son was old enough then; I don't know what age he was, but he had a white T-shirt, and I wasn't very big at the time. I was about a Size 8 I guess. And I put this white T-shirt on with the suit. And Mary Lewis said, "That's a wonderful look. Where did you get it?" And I said, "I made the skirt myself, and it's a riding habit jacket." So it was the first thing I had done that was advertised. It had silver buttons I put on, not brass. And she called it the silver button suit.

Q: So she actually went to Linker and had them make it?

A: She asked if Linker could have 300 or more of those made for a Sunday ad in a couple of weeks.

Q: They must have been thrilled. Do you remember how much it retailed for in those days?


Q: Incredible. About what year was this?

A: It must have been 1936, 1935. It could have been 1929, even.

Q: Sure. But it was still in the early '30s, or, as you say, perhaps 1929.

A: Very early '30s.

Q: So that was really your first commercial success.
A: That was my first commercial success. And then from there Ethel Smith got me a job at Adler and Adler, which was quite well known. It's like Ralph Lauren would be now, almost. I mean, they were known across the country. Best... Even the type of clothes were new; spectator sports. They were very well known for spectator sports, as well as sport clothes. I remember doing Helen Wills' tennis dress. And whoever the top golfer was at the time, a woman golfer. But the tennis and the golfer... Anyway, I did a golf dress for her...

Q: For Adler & Adler.

A: And then Adler & Adler... Lord & Taylor liked my clothes and they wanted to give me a front of windows. Ethel Smith by this time had left Best and gone to Lord & Taylor's and she had started in the sports department there, which was very new, sports clothes; as I say, spectator sports. It was very new. Those were the first real American clothes, too, because they were nothing like French clothes or English. But I worked for Adler & Adler for quite a substantial rise in salary, and as a real designer, which frightened me to death, because I had never done a collection.

Q: There weren't very many real designers?

A: No, there weren't at all. Clare Potter was very young and very new at the time, and so was Claire McCardel. It must have been by this time, about '38...

Q: That was before the Second World War...

A: The Second World War was just showing its ugly head, and Dorothy Shaver, being a very bright woman, decided that American sportswear
was really the thing and she promoted American designers. And Clare Potter was the first, the new woman. A wonderful line. And Claire McCardel and Joset Walker are the three beside myself that come to my mind.

Q: Had you begun to make any of those trips to Europe when you really worked on fabrics, on all kinds of interesting fabrics?

A: Well, I went abroad...My sister lived abroad, and I went over in 1929 to see her. And that's when I was working on Seventh Avenue...

Q: So did you do any work with fabric on that trip...?

A: No, but I learned a lot about fabrics over there. I remember going to Debenham's, a big department store there. And they had a basement and the basement was filled....This was when...I went over there when I was working for Linker & Klein. I bought all this beautiful red fabric that was something like 3 shillings a yard; it would be about 75¢. A beautiful Scottish tweed. And I recognized it and I took my life, almost, in my hands and shipped it over, freight-on-board, so my firm would pay for it. It was one of the greatest successes they had; a beautiful red tweed. And Mr. Linker almost took my head off when he found out that I had ordered it. And I said, "You'll see." And then he went abroad the next year and he didn't do very well himself. And soon I left the firm.

Q: So you did go to Europe for Linker & Klein.

A: No, I went for myself. I went to visit my sister. They would never have given me.
Q: Not even the next time?

A: No. He went himself the next time, and didn't do anything. I never went for the firm. I went to visit my sister. He had done very well with the fabric I had bought and he thought he would go over and do it, and got nowhere, seemingly. Then I left the place and...

Q: Did your leaving have anything to do with the fact that designers were beginning to be known as themselves and you were not being....

A: No. As a matter of fact, it was Ethel Smith who saw what I was doing, and she saw this beautiful red tweed and wonderful coat I made of it and thought, "There is a girl who knows what she's doing," and got me a job with Adler & Adler.

Q: I see. A better job.

A: Yes. Much better. $150 a week, in those days...But unfortunately I...Because of Lord & Taylor's and their wanting to do front windows of my clothes, I brought back this beautiful tweed...They sent me abroad and I brought back a beautiful tweed and they wanted to put it in the windows. But they wouldn't use my name at Adler & Adler, so I left. And then I went to a place called Brous and Jacobson. And they were doing...They were contractors for Linker & Herbert.

Q: Was it by then Linker & Herbert instead of Linker & Klein?

A: Well, Linker & Klein, and later on...They both were...It was Klein & Klein and Linker & Herbert, and I worked for a while for Linker & Klein and then I worked for Linker & Herbert. But that was the same...Klein left. When he left, the name was changed to Linker & Herbert,
but I stayed on with them for about a year or so. And then went to Adler & Adler, and from there to Brous & Jacobson. And I found out about Brous & Jacobson...They were what you called contractors for Linker & Klein; they were a very good, substantial house. And the contractor made all their extra slacks and whatever we were selling at the time...Slacks, I guess. What you use for riding clothes. And they made all the extra riding clothes. And I found out about them...They had a little work room off Eighth Avenue.

Q: But at this time they didn't do their own collection, before you came there.

A: They were just contractors. And they had...it was a hole in the wall, really. Thirty-ninth street and 7-8th Avenue. And I went in to see them and I said...They did $65,000 in business, contracting. And I knew they were good. I knew they had good machines and I knew the head man, because I used to come over and get things fitted and I knew him. He was very nice. Not the boss, but the...Anyway, they said they would take me for $75 a week, and 3% of gross over $65,000. At the end of the year they were doing a million in business, because Lord & Taylor's was my big client, as was Best & Company. And they were fighting for me. Lord & Taylor, Ambergrombie & Fitch, Marshall Field--they all loved my clothes. And they instinctively, in the market, knew who was doing this, because they came immediately to Brous & Jacobson. Because they didn't advertise, they didn't do anything. But the market's like that you know. Plus I had the front windows at Lord & Taylor's, and they would find out who made the clothes and they would come over and see me.
Q: I should think that with that financial arrangement you were probably doing far better than they had had any idea you could possibly do.

A: Oh, they let me go. They wouldn't give me the money after a year and a half, and I went to Max Milstein and the same thing happened. Max Milstein gave me $75 and 3% over...They did exactly the same amount. $65,000. It was on their books. It may have been less, because they would boost whatever they had on the books so they wouldn't have to.

And they were as astonished as I was, I guess, that after a year they showed $1,500,000 in sales. Now, I got it on sales, you see. I got 3% on the sales...They're very tricky on 7th Avenue. If I had done it on percentages of profits or something, they would have shown that they lost money. So I did it on sales. And they thought, "Oh, that's...We're doing $65,000; if we do $1 million,...they did $3 million before I left."

Q: And did they pay you what they owed you?

A: Oh, yes. I had a good contract and a good lawyer. But they didn't mind when I left. By that time they all carried on quite well, as a matter of fact. They're out of business now, but then I went into business for myself, my son lent me $5,000 to let me go into business for myself.

Q: I'm sorry. I just want to get the chronology on this. You left Milstein in what year? About?

A: Milstein's I left...It must have been about 1939...Oh, it must have been later than that, because the war was over.

Q: I see. You started your own business in 1947, I believe.

And at that time you went into business...That's interesting. Your son lent
you money.

A: Yes, because he had just gotten out of... Well, he hadn't just gotten out of the army. After he got out of the army he went back to Amherst to finish his schooling. And he had a little money, and he lent me $500 which helped a lot.

Q: $500 or $5,000.
A: $5,000.

Q: How much did it cost to go into business for yourself in those days?

A: Well, I paid $3,000 a year rent, which was... It was on one of those side streets, like Brous & Jacobson was at the time. On 39th Street, 226 or something, West 39th. And it was in a very, very ordinary building. And there were contractors in the building with me. And the first thing I did.... There again, I think I was aware; I had the guts to do it. The entrance had a linoleum floor that was broken, chipped and broken. And one day I lifted it up and there was a tile floor underneath. So I got the guy who was doing the cleaning, and I said, "Rip up that thing." And I paid him extra... I gave him $10 to rip up the linoleum...

End of Side 1
Q: Varnish.

A: Varnish. And somebody must have decided it was dirty or something and that varnish would make it look better. And this very nice...whatever he was--superintendent--I would give him extra money and he got paint off the walls and then I painted the ceiling, all with my own money. And...Because I wanted the place to look nice for my customers.

Q: And your customers were going to be the same people that you had been...

A: Yes. So I wanted the entrance in my entrance hall, in my building...I put green and white ivy paper and the elevator doors were green and white, with pretty ivy paper. And my showroom was like a little living room. I still have the couch that I bought in my showroom now, and two chairs. And that's all I had in there.

Q: Now, when you went into business...There you were, with $5,000 as part of your financing....

A: Well, I had more than that.

Q: Yes. As part of your financing. And you were really in business on your own. What kind of team did you have?

A: What kind of what?

Q: Team. Who did you have with you?

A: One of the men who was...Mr. Goodman, his name was...

Q: Abe Goodman?

A: Abe Goodman. A wonderful man. And he had worked for Linker and Klein. They fired him, and he was only 62 years old. He lived to be
80; 82. He worked for me until he was 82. And he was my backbone. He knew more about production than...He couldn't read or write!

Q: Oh, really! Oh, then that's not the man I'm thinking of.
A: Oh, I don't know. His name I think was Abe Goodman, but he was a wonderful guy. He was born at the cutting table, I think. He used to kid about it. He couldn't read or write but he could calculate to the nth degree any garment that would come out. He was an incredible man. He knew all about running a factory. He was so delighted to work for me. I knew his daughter very well; his daughter was a great friend of mine. And I had a very small factory. He took the workers...I still have some of them, that came out of...the older men who came out of...They're all my age, and I'm in my eighties, so they're 70-80 years old. Some of them, not all of them, but two or three are still working for me.

Q: So you set up the sample room in this place...
A: Yes. A factory of five machines and six finishers and a cutter.

Q: And a presser.
A: And a presser. And deal with the union, you know. You had to make enough money to pay the union first.

Q: Which union were you part of?
A: International Ladies Garment Workers' Union.

Q: Right.
A: And Mr. Goodman really was very good about getting the factory together for me. It was very small, and I had a lot of business
when I opened, and the first year I was in business I did $1,500,000
worth of business, in that little...And I remember that the reason
I moved to Seventh Avenue was because darling Herbert Sondheim was
a good friend...We were in Canada together, both of us, on some fashion
thing. And he was a charming man. And he said, "You know, there's a
loft right above me. And it's Hattie Carnegie's loft." And it was
hard to get. It was still right after the war and real estate was...

Q: And this was at 530 Seventh Avenue...
A: 530 Seventh Avenue. And he said, "It's a wonderful loft.
It's $10,000 a year, and you'd have to put $3,000 down." You know, you
had to put "under the table" payment down in those days. And...Oh!
I went home, and I didn't sleep for thinking about it. And he said,
"You do it, girl; you'll do it. You'll take that loft." And that
was Hattie Carnegie's loft, and there were machines in it. She left
some machines and I took my machines with me. So that was the beginning
of what my business is now. And, of course, I was very successful
there the first year.

Q: Now, when you were in the first year and ended up with
a million and a half, were you always, at the beginning, heavily in-
volved with specialty stores? Was this...?
A: Well, mostly. Outside of Lord & Taylor's....

Q: Well, they're considered a specialty store too. They just
are a large specialty store. But I differentiate in the sense that Altman's
has furniture. That makes it a department store. Lord & Taylor's has
some antiques, but it's not considered a department store.
A: No... A large specialty store... A few like that. I. Magnin's we sold and all the good ones. Goldwater's is still the only big store. I don't sell Lord & Taylor's anymore.

Q: Oh, really.

A: No. The reason I don't sell many people in New York or any in New York is because Lord & Taylor had such dibs on my name--they had exclusive right to my name--and nobody could use it in New York. So I lost the specialty shops.

Q: But Bergdorf's used it didn't they? For a while?

A: Yes, but mostly catalogue, I wouldn't say they use my clothes. They did very well with them, but they don't seem to like Ultrasuede and that type.

Q: No, but I remember reading of the days when Andrew Goodman was co-chairman, was he not, of one of the many expositions that were given of your things?

A: Oh. At the Museum of the City of New York. Yes.

Q: I'm sorry. I don't mean to get you off the subject. But we were talking about specialty stores... Essentially, you liked to deal with specialty stores.

A: Oh, I wouldn't deal with a large department store. As a matter of fact, the big department stores did give me an enormous amount of business. And even when I was working for other people I had my eyes open and I would see that they'd be hipped on the clothes. For two or three years, they would order $200,000-$500,000 worth of merchandise, and one of their failures was that they'd drop you like a hotcake, and you'd
be used to selling all this merchandise. If you lose $300,000 worth of business all at once, you can lose your business. And I remember Mr. Milstein saying, "I don't think I want to sell them anymore."

Another thing they do is they buy a large percentage of merchandise that they expect you to take back. The big houses can do it, like Lauren today or people of that kind. Or, I guess, even Adler & Adler could do it because they had outlets in South America or places... Puerto Rico or some place. But we were never big enough for that. And I didn't want $20,000 worth of merchandise back in one fell swoop at all. From a specialty shop, the most you get back is something that's really wrong and your're glad to take it back knowing that you've done something wrong so you can correct it.

Q: Did you do trunk shows when you started your business?
A: Oh, I did. I had to do them. I learned a lot at trunk shows. That's where I learned how hard it was for women to get into clothes. You know, they have pear shaped figures and very rarely do they have tiny waists and small hips and big shoulders. Raglan coats are always good for those figures, and they're coming back again I noticed. The big look is the raglan coat.

Q: I've been interested in the trunk show. I've been trying to establish when they began, and I don't really know.
A: No, they were done quite early I think.
Q: Before the Second World War?
A: I don't think so. I think the trunk show came after the war. I don't think there were very many of them before then. There were very
few salesmen going out and selling. There were very few women designers, as a matter of fact.

Q: So there you were, doing your $1,500,000 on the side street, and then you moved to 530 Seventh Avenue.

A: I didn't sleep for two nights, when I signed my contract, because I had to pay $10,000 a year. That's a lot of money—from $3,000 to $10,000. I must say Herbert Sondheim was perfectly marvelous. He said, "I know how much people like your clothes. You'll do very, very well." And I did. I took his advice and I'm glad I did. He had a charming wife. She was from Argentina.

Q: He was married a couple of times.

A: He was. Stephen's mother was Foxy.

Q: Right. Sure. Alicia I think her name was, was it not? The one you're talking about?

A: Yes. But it was the second...I never knew Foxy very well; I didn't know Stephen's mother. But I did know Herbert's wife. She was either Russian or Argentinian.

Q: I think her name was Alicia; that's all I can remember.

A: Alicia. I think she was an Argentinian; I'm not sure. She was a darling woman, and he was a beautiful man.

Q: Yes. Wonderful man.

A: He, David Goodstein and Charles Nudelman were just princes. I mean they....In that market, they were educated, ran their businesses beautifully. They made Seventh Avenue; and after that there were not so many schlock houses around, as we used to call them. They and Lord
& Taylor's I think did a lot to establish Seventh Avenue as a great trade center.

Q: Well now, you said it was Dorothy Shaver who started the promotion of names of American designers.
A: American clothes. Yes. And children's clothes she promoted. She was a great woman. If she were alive today she'd have many more kudos I think to her credit, because she was....I think she started The Fashion Group.
Q: She was one of the originators, yes.
A: She was one of the originators of The Fashion Group.
Q: I have heard a number of times that you were the only woman who was a member of the Industrial Council. . .
A: Of the Coat and Suit Workers.
Q: Right. How did that happen?
A: Well, it just happened that I was the only woman making tailored clothes. All the rest were dress manufacturers and I was in the industrial coat and suit angle, where they are all men. All the owners were men.
Q: Well, but you did do dresses and you did do suits.
A: I did them later on. Dresses.
Q: I see.
A: I first did ski wear and riding habits and things like that.
Q: And that's what put you into that group.
A: But, you belong to a guild and...The dress...I didn't have to belong to both, fortunately. The few dresses I made, they used to go
Q: And you were a member of The Industrial Council.
A: Well...Yes. I remember going to one meeting, and I was the only woman in the place; I realized that there were all these large manufacturers, all large to medium sized...The biggest ones... Herbert of Linker and Herbert was there; he saved my life, because I didn't know anybody in the place; and he came over and sat and talked to me.

Q: What kinds of things did the Council do?
A: Well, the whole market was in The Industrial Council. You had to belong to it.

Q: When you say "the whole market," does that include people like Herbert Sondheim and...
A: Sure. Everybody. Well, Herbert Sondheim was a dress manufacturer. This was coats and suits, so he didn't belong to The Industrial Council of Coat and Suit Makers.

Q: So that they dealt with...
A: Actually, what you're talking about...or what we're both talking about now is that one was the union and the other was The Industrial Council of Coat & Suit Workers, which is a buffer. See, the unions got too strong and the Council got together to be a buffer against the union so they wouldn't demand too short hours and things of that sort.

Q: All right. So now you are established in your business, the war is over, and travel is possible again. So would you tell a little bit about some of the travels that you undertook in those years and how
they affected your business as well; or, what you did in your business?

    A: Well, I guess I went over certainly once a year, or
    once every other year. I can't remember. But I traveled mostly to
    Scotland and Ireland, and very, very few times to France. I never
    was involved with France very much.

    End of Tape 1
Q: ....Vera Maxwell. This will be the second interview. It takes place on Tuesday, October 11, 1983; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

We had begun to talk a little bit last time about travel and what your travels have meant to you, both personally and professionally...Would you like to comment on that?

A: Well, my first travels, of course, were very early in my life. Later, when I traveled for my business it broadened out because I met so many people...Mr. and Mrs. Blake in Scotland, who ran the Adam Patterson mills, whose fabrics I used for years and worked very closely with. Mr. Blake owned the Adam Patterson mills. The Scots, I found, take a long while to get to know, but once you know them they're the most loyal friends you can have anywhere in the world. As I say, after 50 years, we're still very close friends. I met the Earl of Bute, who also had mills in Scotland. I never got to know him very well, but he was a charming man and invited me to dinner. I remember that I didn't have anything to wear. It was very cold. I cut the top of a sweater off (a cashmere sweater) and tied...I still have the sweater.

Q: What's the story on that? You were invited to dinner?

A: And I didn't...You know, it's very cold in Scotland. I went to a dinner party and I didn't have...I traveled always very lightly, and at the Blake's I would never have to have an evening dress; they had small dinner parties and things like that. But I decided I wanted to look my best and I didn't have anything that was...

Q: This was at the Earl of Bute's?
A: Yes. And I cut out the neck of a grey cashmere sweater I had and made it low, but not exactly décolleté, but I had some very good jewelry, and I had a grey jersey... A very, very full grey jersey pleated skirt, and I had slit the front of the sweater, (that was the beginning of my "wrapped blouse," and I attached a ribbon to each side of the sweater, wrapped the sweater around, and I wore a very good looking belt with it. And it was nice and warm, because cashmere is warm and it is cold in some of those English houses. And it always amused me--I'll always remember it--Because it was the beginning of my wrapped idea. And I still have that costume; it's in my archives.

Q: You still have it!

A: I still have it. We show it in almost every fashion show. And then I show the wrapped blouse that came after it.

Q: As a result of... Yes. Right.

A: But... I'm sorry now that we're not as much into tweeds as we were then. Women don't seem to have... In those days you wore tweeds to travel. You know, country wear, and you might have a few tweeds for country wear now, but tweeds generally are not as much used as they were in the forties.

Q: Are they being produced as much as they were?

A: Well, I don't see nearly as many. Everybody knew me for beautiful tweeds, because it was my passion, almost, to design them and to have them woven for me, and Lord & Taylor's would have fronts of windows with all kinds of tweeds I designed. I once went to Liberty of London, (I loved that store), and I found absolutely beautiful buttons. I saw buttons. They were very inexpensive and the were all semi-precious stones. They
were buttons made of I suppose not very valuable amber--yellow amber--
and some buttons made of cinnabar and what they call turquoise chips.
Very East Indian; very tiny turquoise chips set in silver, silver
being very cheap in those days. And the fourth one called lapis lazuli.
Evidently lapis lazuli chips again. And I had the buttons, I looked at
those buttons and I thought, "Oh, wouldn't it be marvelous to have a
tweed color done to those buttons; a suit with semi-precious stones."
And I was very excited about it and I went up to my friend Blake at
the Adam Patterson mills, and sure enough they got the colors absolutely
perfect, and what happened is that...I worked so closely with him up
there, and he had several types of yarn. One was a lamb's wool and cashmere
--very little cashmere--and then something dyed a little darker. These
are just off white yarns, or natural yarns. And he wove them into a sort
of plaid, with the different types of yarns, into a plaid, and dyed it
and they were marvelous because they...When you think of all the trouble
we went to to do this, but it was exciting to do. I was excited and
Blake was excited, and when the fabric came out it was absolutely divine,
and the most beautiful shade...two or three shades of light yellow; the
cinnabar was two or three shades of rose red; the lapis, as everybody
knows, is light and dark. And it was incredible. And the turquoise
was marvelous too. And those four colors came out beautifully. And I
took them back...And I wasn't in business for myself then. I was working
for somebody. And he complained a little bit about the price of the
tweed, but then he found out that Lord & Taylor was going to do a front
of windows, they were so excited about the colors and the tweed and the
looks of the tweed that they gave me the front windows...What happened was that they wouldn't pay for the expensive buttons. They weren't that expensive. So we had to dye just the ordinary bone buttons, dyed to match. And only my small customers, out of town, bought the real semi-precious stone buttons. They wouldn't pay the little extra money, and I had a price...I think the suit sold for $49.75 or $69.75, and it was $75 or something with the good buttons and $69.75 for the buttons that were dyed bone buttons; the ordinary buttons. But I did get a front of windows at Lord & Taylor's... It was the joy of doing it. It was just wonderful. A wonderfully interesting thing to do and to have somebody... A mill that was as nice as that, that I had such nice relationships with. It was a wonderful thing.

We worked so closely together,...There was another fabric story. It was very interesting...A few years later...This was fortunately when I was in business for myself...I was always back in the mill's store rooms and I saw a shelf of two shades of green. There's a very, very great difference between piece dye and yarn dye. Yarn dye is...If you have a yarn dye tweed, the tweed is dyed first and then they weave it, and that was the most expensive tweed. And if you have a tweed that's dyed in a piece dye...It's much less expensive, because they just dye however many yards you like. When you do yarn dyed fabric, it had to be dyed first and then rolled. Evidently, somebody ordered a green, two shades of green in a tweed, and never bought it. So here he was with bolts and bolts of the tweed itself, the yarn, on combs. Yarns of combs all over the place. And I said, "Oh, that's such nice shades of green." And suddenly...This
was in his storeroom, which is a wonderful place to see. These little tiny Scottish mills that did all their work by hand...They were wonderful people to work with. And in the storeroom there were many, many shades besides the two shades of green, but not an awful lot of any one shade. I suddenly...I had just come from my dahlia garden down in Bucks County (I had a house down there), and I loved dahlias and zinnias and all those marvelous colors--purples and reds and greens and pinks. They looked wonderful together. I looked up and said, "Oh, Douglas, I have a marvelous idea if you can do it. Why don't we use the green as a weft, and then put all these colors you have on it and see what happens? And I'll call it my "dahlia" tweed." And it turned out to be the most beautiful tweed, and it was copied all over the place, and I got a front of windows for that at Lord & Taylor.

That was lots of fun, because he was so delighted to use up all that green, and he gave me a wonderful price on the tweed, and he used every color that he had. And strangely enough....Two shades of yellow, three shades of rose, two of lavender...All, in the warp of the tweed, and we used the green weft because we had more of the green. And it turned out to be a beautiful tweed.

Q: It sounds fantastic.

A: They were fascinating days for me. The same thing happened in Ireland...I think I told you once that I went to Clifton and there was a little man...He was making his tweeds. You have to...I can't think for the moment, when you pull the yarn to make a tweed out of just the wool, it has to be done with a spinning wheel; it's done with a spinning wheel.
You do it by hand. And instead of turning the wheel by hand (because all of these things are very archaic and done by hand), he was sitting on a bicycle running his spinning wheel. Which I thought was a most amusing thing. I have a picture of him somewhere, I think. He was so adorable, and he also made some tweeds for me. He was a little harder to work with, because you can imagine how...He was amusing, but he was not very serious, really, about it. And he couldn't produce very much. He was a very small producer.

Q: Are any of these people still functioning?
A: Adam Patterson has been out of business for 15 years. They retired, but we still keep in touch; I still see them. But they've both retired. They're my age, you know. They're retired. I don't know what happened to my little man in Clifton. I haven't seen him for a long while.

Q: Are there other places that have...?
A: I don't know. As I say, tweeds are not....I now don't even go abroad for tweeds. There are a few people who bring tweeds over. The Otterburn people are very, very good. Otterburn is on the borderline...

Q: Otterburn is spelled...
A: O-t-t-e-r-b-u-r-n.

Q: Thank you.
A: Otterburn. The Otterburn tweeds are the north of England and...They're called borderline people, you know. Sassenachs, they're really called. They're not Scots, they're not quite north of England. They're called amusingly, Sassenachs. A very old Anglo-Saxon word,
Sassenachs. But the Otterburn people still make beautiful tweeds. They're frightfully expensive now. That's another reason why they're difficult to use. As I said, I used to get tweeds for... An expensive tweed would be $6 a yard, $5 a yard.

Q: And it was very wide.

A: Beautiful. Oh, 54" wide. Now, an Otterburn tweed is about $30 a yard, and, of course, the suits are very expensive. They buy me Ultrasuedes now rather than the tweeds.

Q: Ultrasuede is another fabric which...

A: Well, our lifestyles have changed a lot. I remember when I used to go abroad on a boat, you had to have a steamer coat, which would be either a heavy tweed coat or a Harris tweed coat or, if you were an Austrian you'd have a loden cloth coat. That was the kind of coat to wear on a boat. Even if you were tourist class, you always saw women in tweeds or some kind of a daytime coat.

Q: And, of course, in the early days that you're talking about, you always went by boat.

A: You always went by boat. You couldn't go any other way, up until the '50s. I think my first air trip, on a sleeper, was in maybe '51 or '52; I'm not quite sure. But it was the first time you could go abroad and sleep, and I remember seeing the Aurora Borealis for the first time. Wonderful lights. I couldn't sleep all night, it was so exciting. We stopped, in those days, first at Gander and then in Iceland, at Reykjavik, and you could get out of the plane if you wanted to; it was early in the morning. And then you'd arrive in Glasgow... and I loved that...
because that plane landed in Glasgow, and then I could go straight to my mills. And that was one of my first trips over.

And I guess it's an easy trip that way. And then it landed in London I guess, but I always got out in Scotland. Later I used to take Scandinavian...SAS, from New York, immediately to Scotland, and then to Denmark, and I loved that. It's a luxurious airline. But later the planes went further and further nonstop, and now the Swissair goes directly from New York to Holland, nonstop. But I always took it when it stopped in Glasgow.

Q: What are some of the other things you observed on your numerous trips? For example, I think I remember an incident that made a great impression concerning your observation of how women dressed in Europe. It had to do with twin sweater sets, and observing the luncheon you attended with Princess Grace..

A: Oh, well that's just modern now.

Q: Well, that was in the early '50s though.

A: No. The early '50s was when we were wearing...Or even earlier...

...We were wearing twin sweater sets and tweed skirts. And a little circle pin. A college girl was always in a tweed skirt and what we call a twin sweater set. If you were rich you had a cashmere one; if not, you had lamb's wool. A short, sleeveless sweater and a cardigan over it. And you always wore a little circle gold pin or a circle pearl pin with earrings, and this was almost a uniform, the way blue jeans are today. This was in the '40s and the '50s. And the '50s became a little different, with the full skirts--when the Dior look came in--so it must have been the '30s
and the '40s, up to the war....After the war. But what amused me, in France, at that time...If I'd go to France, which I did in '39, the French women were always terribly dressed up. They were always what they call mastique....It means you just came out of the hairdresser and you haven't got..."astiqué" the word is--"a-s-t-i-q-u-e"--and it means terribly shiny. It actually means "waxed." "Astiquer" means "to wax the floor." And you would see these women and their hair looked almost waxed. They had just come from the hairdresser and they were beautifully dressed, but they did have an English tweed on, and it was done with lots of pockets and lapels and they had furs and a frilly blouse--They were always very "dressed." And what amused me was that just last year, when I went abroad, just before Princess Grace died, I went to a lunch in France with her, and all the women were dressed like the 1920s. They had tweed skirts on, twin sweater sets and little circle pins. And suddenly they went back to the '20s and this was terribly chic. It was very "a l'Anglais", as they would say. They were copying what they thought was the English. They didn't realize that we had done it in America too. But certainly the English wore twin sweater sets, with the cardigan, before we did. But it amused me to see this in 1980, in France--a direct copy of what we were doing so many years ago.

Q: Do you think there's an international kind of a look and that you were able...

A: Well, I think...No, not very much. I must say, when you went over in those days, in the '30s, in 1939 or right after the war, if you went over, you could see an Italian, a woman who was Italian. If she
was a very elegant Italian and a very well bred Italian, she'd always be in black and her hair was very smooth and crisp, and she'd have very little jewelry on—one little pin or something—if you would see her at the theatre; you could spot...and usually not be mistaken that she was Italian. The English would be nicely dressed but not quite stylish. The French were over dressed as a rule, I thought, for my taste anyway. And you could always tell an American girl walking around the streets in Paris. You could tell Italian men. They always wore very short suits that were very fitted. And the Englishman wore lounge suits, you know, and sometimes Oxford bags in those days. There were distinctions then. The German would be...try to dress like the English but never made it. You could usually tell, you know. The German would be a little bit...I don't know. You can't quite describe it. It's very, very difficult. But if you have an eye for those things you can...

Q: It also has something to do with the hairdo doesn't it?

With the men?

A: Yes. The Englishmen...The Prince of Wales in those days set the style for most of the Englishmen. And the Frenchmen, by and large, had fitted suits rather than a sack suit. Their suits were more fitted than the Englishmen's suits, and their trousers sometimes were tighter or very loose, depending on the times.

Q: When you made the most recent trip with your grandchildren, did you notice anything?
A: Everything is so crowded now. I loathe traveling now. I don't think I'll travel again unless I have to, or unless somebody takes me over on a boat like the Queen Mary. But to go to an airport today. I don't know, it seems to me—not to be snobbish, but—I always think it's rather ridiculous. We had first class tickets, and I did it because I wanted to travel very comfortably with my grandchildren. And at my age, I felt I should do it because it was going to be a trying trip anyway. But you notice, they get all the other passengers on the plane first, and you've been waiting for hours. If the plane is a little bit late or something, you've been waiting there for hours, for the plane. And you're the last ones on. They let everybody else on, and then they let you on. And coming out of the plane, you do arrive out first because you're in the first class compartment. I mean everyone travels in all this, and it's unbearable. Waiting for planes, and waiting for taxi cabs, and your hotels are full, and even though you reserved a hotel room months in advance they forgot about it or something, and you arrive and have to go to another hotel. It's terrible to travel.

Q: It certainly isn't the fun that it used to be, no question.

A: Oh, traveling was lovely; of course, I was younger, and it was much easier to travel.

Q: Would you talk about some of the other things that you
did first. Like the sweater that you described just a few minutes ago. Some of the things that really were very special to you; for example what I think has been called your "speed" suit even just...I don't think you've talked about any of the things that you have designed that were special to you.

A: Well, I think one of the earliest things that I did was the riding habit suit. Of course, the tweeds that I just talked about, were what I was known for--very simple suits that I made, some of them cardigan suits, some of them tight fitting, short jackets and full skirts, depending on what they were wearing that year. They were mostly classic suits that I did, in beautiful tweeds. But one of the earliest things that I did was when I saw my...This was in 1939, when I was abroad and my sister was married to an Englishman. At that time the Prince of Wales was wearing....(Americans were not wearing) Oxford bags--those loose flannel trousers, and Harris tweed jackets, or tweed jackets. The Prince of Wales hadn't really come to America yet. American men were still wearing business suits. Even on the golf course they were wearing plus-fours, which the Prince of Wales wore too. But my brother-in-law looked so...I thought he looked so wonderful in those grey flannel slacks and a jacket, and a little sweater underneath. And when I got back I got some grey flannel, (I was working for a riding habit house then), and I took a riding habit jacket and took the leather out of the back...the rubber out of the back, and put a grey flannel skirt with that, and a little white T-shirt that my son had. I put it on and wore it to see Mary
Lewis, with this riding habit jacket, and some ski clothes that I was supposed to bring over. She was the Vice President of Best & Co., and she said, "Where did you get that costume that you have on?" and I said, "Oh, I just saw some grey flannel, and one of the workers helped me make the skirt, and the jacket is a riding habit jacket that I took the back out of." And I had put different buttons on it; I put silver buttons on it. And she adored it. She said, "That is very good looking. Would you go back and tell your boss I can do an ad for it. If he can get 300 out for us in three weeks." So that was my first legitimate ad. It didn't have my name on it. I still have the ad for the suit, you know. And that was one of my...Actually, that was the beginning of separates, which were popular later on. And then when I began selling Lord & Taylor's, the buyer, who ran the separates department bought all my sports clothes. She was a very good buyer, and I made a lot of separates for her.

Q: Was that also the period of that famous weekend costume that you...?

A: The weekend wardrobe was in 1939. That was when...I was not working for myself then, I was working for either Brous & Jacobson or ...I can't remember...And we had just gotten the 40 hour week, which... We always worked until 1:00 at least on Saturday. And believe it or not it was a great thing to have a whole weekend to yourself. Leave on Friday night and not have to come back to work on Saturday. So I evolved the weekend wardrobe. It didn't sell. I don't think anybody bought it.

Q: What did it consist of?
A: Slacks. The first pair of grey flannel slacks I made. I had a little short skirt; it looks like a mini-skirt now. A little short, pleated skirt, that was a "beagling" skirt. Nobody "beagles" today; they don't even know what it is. But when anybody sees my pleated skirt, in the weekend wardrobe, they always think it's a mini-skirt, but that came in the '50s or '60s. Mine was not; it's a "beagling" skirt. In "beagling," you go with a pair of beagles cross country, and you'd have to cross stiles and things, and you wore woolen stockings and you wore a short skirt because you couldn't get over the...And it had to be a full skirt, and you jumped over the stiles. And women in those days didn't wear as many slacks as they do now. And that was our beagling skirt, and that's in the weekend wardrobe. And then a regular pleated skirt; you know, a pleated skirt in grey flannel and I guess it's an Irish Donegal tweed jacket, grey and white jacket, collarless with four patch pockets. That's my famous Einstein jacket.

Einstein was at Princeton when my brother was there, and I used to go to see my brother and I would see Einstein with a soft white shirt with a soft black bow and he always...He smoked a pipe I think, and it seems to me when I would see him walking down the street...He always had his hand with his pipe in his pocket, and he would have a jacket...It's really, it probably was...What was the great German school, the university? Heidelberg. And I think they were Heidelberg jackets but I'm not sure. It certainly wasn't in tweed, I've forgotten what it was made of. Some kind of tweedy...Or maybe it was even loden cloth. But I remember the four patch pockets on his jacket. And it may have
had a collar, but I always liked collarless things because I have a short neck myself and I think it's kind of nice to wear a scarf around your neck.

So, the Einstein jacket became very popular. There is a magazine, that went out of business long, long ago, but in which there is a picture of myself, but a little caricature of Einstein and myself with a little pad, copying Einstein's jacket. But that jacket had a history, because when I designed it, and Lord & Taylor advertised it, it was in Vogue. Rosenfeld, one of the tragedies of Seventh Avenue, one of the tragedies of designers on Seventh Avenue, picked that style up and he made...I think he did $11 million worth of business in a year on the Einstein jacket that he did in gabardine.

Q: Who was he?
A: Rosenfeld...

Q: Henry Rosenfeld, was that it?
A: Henry Rosenfeld! Right! Henry Rosenfeld picked it up, did it in gabardine, collarless, four patch pockets, and pleated skirt, and it sold, much less expensive than mine because they were cut by the thousands, in nice colors. So I said I had at least dressed a lot of American women.

Q: That was a knockoff I take it...
A: Oh, it was a big knockoff. There were a lot of them like that you know.

Q: There was no protection for designers...
A: You couldn't. And I know when I was working for Adler & Adler, they tried desperately...Adler & Adler and David Goodstein and
Herbert Sondheim and Lloyd Weil--they all tried, there were five of them--they all tried desperately. But you couldn't beat...They couldn't
hire, they couldn't get enough money together to hire lawyers as ex-
pensive as Rosenfeld's.

Q: Rosenfeld.

A: Rosenfeld's lawyers. Because they all made so much money, and
together they couldn't get a lawyer that could counteract the clout
that these big people had. They made millions on things that were made
in section work, bought fabrics in such quantities that they paid very
little for them. But still we all lived and kept designing despite that
...Another thing that was just knocked off immediately...My son, on
Halloween, wore his little leather jacket inside out and the inside of
the jacket was beautiful, absolutely fresh yellow lambskin. Bright
yellow lambskin. And it looked so pretty. Kids wore their jackets
inside out on Halloween. So I looked at it and I said, "Oh, that should
be easy to find," and I went down to find out where you could get lambskin.
I had a furrier who used to make fur collars for us. I went down to a
man who I found out was the great connoisseur of lambskin, and I could
get very cheap lambskin. I think it was for 20¢ a skin or something like
that. All lovely bright yellow and quite large. Lamb is not...Baby lamb is
a fairly decent size. And I said to myself, "With four or five lambskins
you could make a wonderful jacket." And I said, "I want it outside, collar-
less." I made sort of a Einstein jacket again, in lambskin, and I have
an ad of that in Vogue. Vogue picked it up immediately. It had a plaid
skirt in Maxwell plaid. I got the orginal Maxwell plaid. I made a Maxwell
-51-
plaid skirt, and a little Maxwell scarf at the neck; and the model has mittens on and she's pulling a sleigh I think. It's a charming Vogue picture. And somebody in Boston picked it up, a furrier. Mine was selling for I think it was $35. And it was sold in this place for $10, the sheepskin jacket. They were able to sell it for $10. They had the white curly sheepskin that wasn't nearly as pretty. It came out...Life Magazine picked the white curly lambskin for a full page in color. I never got into....

Q: You have to feel terribly flattered when they pick something up, actually, as long...

A: As long as you can go on designing and have other ideas it's all right, but it annoys me.

Q: Of course.

A: How they picked up so quickly.

Q: During the period that you...When you started to do separates (and that was really very early, because you had this great feeling about it), separates as part of what? Spectator sports?

A: Well, it was called spectator...Lord & Taylor really...Dorothy Shaver was probably the most creative and...I don't know quite how to say it. She was an imaginative person. She made American design. She saw that we would no longer be able to get French...We did nothing but copy. Talk about us copying! We copied the French endlessly. And the French were very happy, because we would go over and buy all of their clothes in volume, almost, and bring them here and copy them all. The couture still sold to the private clients, naturally, but an enormous
amount of American buyers in department stores would go over to France and buy the French. We the American designers had to copy them. Well, not the American designers, but we on Seventh Avenue had to copy the French clothes. Now, I always said I could make six suits out of one good French suit because there's too much on it. It would have a double collar and two kinds of pockets and three kinds of stitching on the sleeve, and a little bit going on in the back. I'd look at it, and I'd say, "Well, I'll make four different types out of this one." And I wasn't able to; I had to copy it line for line.

Q: And then there's Dorothy Shaver and her...

A: Well, she was the first to recognize the fact that French fashion would eventually be out because of the war, and she had... Dorothy Shaver took Claire McCardel... Claire McCardel was the first one she took; then Clare Potter. She was very well known, worked for Nudelman; Joset Walker, who was a junior designer, and myself. And we all... That's the beginning of our fronts of windows at Lord & Taylor. It really exploited the American designer, to the welfare of all the American designers, I think. She created American design. Promoted it. She did wonders for it.

Q: You went into business for yourself in 1947, and you described redoing the showroom and the building entrance, and that was really very exciting. Lord & Taylor continued to be your great showcase, right?

A: Yes, for a while. Quite a while I guess. I can't quite remember how long. But when Dorothy Shaver died, her vice-president was
made president.

Q: Mel Dawley, was that...

A: Mel Dawley came in, and he was very...Loved my clothes and went on selling Vera Maxwell's and I always had at least two fronts of windows a year at Lord & Taylor's. And, of course, Lord & Taylor sold the rest of the country. They had about five or six shops across the country, and I sold numerous shops, needless to say, because of the ads at Lord & Taylor; I was known throughout America, the United States. But when I went into business for myself, it lasted until Dawley came in as the President, and Mr. Blum came in, and I don't know how long it's been that he's been there...

Q: Mr. Brooks?

A: Blum was the merchandiser...The merchandise manager. But he didn't like my clothes. He...You can say that. But he liked men designers better; he liked Halston and Geoffrey Beene; he catered more to those, to men. And I didn't like...Anyway, they in a way, went more mass production. I seem to have lost Lord & Taylor's after Dorothy Shaver. But fortunately, American fashion has gone on even more strongly than ever.

Q: When did you start with Ultrasuede?

A: In '71.

Q: In '71. And I still design. It still goes on. It's very difficult for me. I embroider it, I print it, I quilt it, I do everything to make it look new and different, but it's hard. And my customers insist on it. I mean, they ask for it. They still ask, fortunately, for the
"speed" suit which I started. That was about the same time. I did the "speed suit" in 1970, I think it was, for a speed suit that I did. And Bergdorf Goodman adored that. They gave me a big ad on the first speed suit, and sold it very well.

Q: Could you describe it a little bit?

A: Well, I think...I found out the yarns...The German Olympic team had the most marvelous bathing suit. It sounds so funny, but this is what happens in fashion. And I got a hold of one of the bathing suits. It had a new latex yarn in it that stretched out beautifully and never went out of shape, no matter what you did with it. I found out where it came from. You know, bathing suits were made in Germany, needless to say. But I found out where they got the fabric, the jersey latex fabric; and I think it actually came from Africa, of all places.

Q: Really!

A: And I finally found a maker and ordered some of it. And they didn't have many colors; they had black and navy blue, which was all right. They were sweaters, actually, that they made. Not fabric by the yard. I couldn't find the fabric by the yard anywhere. All I could find were black and navy long sleeved sweaters with a sort of boat neck. So I bought these, and they were marvelous sweaters. You would put them on and they would stretch unmercifully, but they always went tightly back into shape. They were almost like a corset, but they really gave you shape. So I decided to put a big skirt with that, and we do have elastic yarn, you know. You can shirr the elastic yarn and it stretches out and everybody knows, who has any kind of underwear today. So I used
the elastic yarn at the waistline and you could stretch that out. And there wasn't a button or a hook and eye or a snap on the dress at all. And I put little printed cuffs, cotton printed cuffs and a cotton printed skirt on the black sweater, and the print was a black and white print or a black and white silk. Or there was a navy and white print with a navy sweater, and I guess Bergdorf bought the navy and white cotton print with the navy top. Well, they sold about 500-600, and all over the country it sold. Women loved it because it was a wonderful traveling item. You could throw it in a handbag; you didn't have to have somebody zip you up the back or worry about a snap falling off or a button falling off. It lasted for about three years; I sold a lot of them. And then it...I got tired of using it too. But I have been asked for it all the time. It's one of those things that's strange... Not enough people asked for it to put it on the line again, but I do make it for a few people.

Q: The interesting thing to me is that you have been so interested, always, in natural fabrics. Natural fibers. And yet you had been open-minded enough to respond to something like Ultrasuede and the elastic yarn.

A: Well, I remember when orlon...Or even before orlon, the acrylic yarns first came in....

Q: DuPont?

A: DuPont and Celanese. Celanes and DuPont made the first artificial yarns in fabrics, but they were...The first ones they made were very, very...not bad, but they were sold to the cheapest houses. Lerner's had
whole fronts of windows of these...They were naturally used in under-
wear first. Stockings, underwear...in artificial yarns first. And 
later on they started making dresses out of it. Very, very cheap. If 
you saw a pleated skirt, it would have tight little pleats and it was 
badly made; badly sewn and put together. And I looked at the fabric, 
and I said, "The fabric isn't bad; it's the way it's made that is so 
bad." So I went to Celanese and bought some and made a very, very full 
skirt and I made my wrap blouse out of it and that was sensational, be-
cause you could pull it around your waist, you know, and it had a very, 
very full pleated skirt. The picture is in my office...

Q: I think I remember...
A: The first pleated skirt...
Q: Now, this is back in the '40s.
A: That was back in the '40s. And when I made the wrap before, 
I made the wrap blouse originally. But it really sold so very, very well. 
I made a shirt dress, with beautifully tailored...Not so much a tailored 
collar, but a small bow tie, so every way the fabric would be enhanced, 
I would use it that way. But it would be a beautiful big bow, whereas if 
somebody else, a very, very cheap house in those days, would sell....say 
Lerner's, would sell a $10.95 dress, shabbily made; a little skimpy bow. 
I made a little dress with an enormous bow at the neck and beautiful big 
sleeves and a tight cuff and very, very well done. And they sold very 
well. Lord & Taylor, who at that time wouldn't buy anything but real 
silos for their upper class trade, you know, did sell in the better de-
partments, and they loved it. I remember the dress buyer at Lord & Taylor 
became entranced with it. It sold very, very well. Of course you could
wash it and put it on again. It was the first actual fabric that you could wash easily and wear right away.

Q: Tell us the story of Ultrasuede.

A: Well, Nancy White, you know, had a swatch of it in her hand, and she said...

Q: She was then with Harper's.

A: She was with Harper's...Either that or she was at Bergdorf.

Q: No, she wasn't; she was at Harper's.

A: And she had a couple of swatches, and she said, "Oh, you can't get it. They'll only sell it into France. It'll go into the couture houses. Very expensive, and it's a very, very new fabric." And I loved it. I said, "Have you ever seen anything that looked so much like real suede in your life?" I've seen hundreds of imitation suedes that looked...

They had jersey backs, and they looked cheap. I bought an enormous amount of fabric in Japan--a lot of silks in Japan, always. I called my Japanese contact and I asked if they knew this house that made the Ultrasuede, and he said, "Yes, we know him very well." And I said, "I wish you would tell him about me," and they did. And I guess it was about three weeks later, four or five bowing Japanese came into my showroom and asked for me. Fortunately I was there, and I brought out...I showed them my work and I showed them around. I showed them the work that I did. And they said, yes, they would sell me but I'd have to buy $50,000 worth of fabric. So...Well, they had lovely colors. That's one of the lucky things about having your own business. I didn't have to go to a partner or anybody. And the price of the fabric...it was then $20 a yard; it's now about
$35 a yard, at retail. But even that...To lay out $50,000...for a fabric. But I did; I took a chance. I was so...Well, they brought pieces of it down and I saw how marvelous it was. And I put it on the line and I mixed it with tweeds. You know, I would have an Ultrasuede skirt and a tweed jacket. I would do different things with it. I used it even with velvet, and I had a couple of dresses in Ultrasuede, and it didn't sell.

Q: It did not sell.

A: It didn't sell the first season. But fortunately for me, Halston came out at the same time and all...The couture clients bought his dresses; the ladies. He didn't sell it wholesale; he didn't do much wholesale in those days...
A: Evidently these women loved it. And all these women went to small...bought other clothes at small specialty shops across the country. The kind of women that Halston sold. So then my buyers realized that these women were wearing Ultrasuede and they came into me, and I was less expensive and I probably had a different assortment or something, but I suddenly sold it like mad. All these specialty shops that I sold came in the following season so I was not stuck with my Ultrasuede.

Q: Yes. And being rewarded in a sense for being sufficiently open minded that it was not a problem for you that it was a man-made fiber. Because, at the time recognizing the validity of a man-made fiber, was rare.

A: Well, there were some man-made products...There were some nylons that were impossible to use...The reason that I realized it was...Unfortunately, at first, both Celanese and DuPont, made almost a sleazy kind of...They wanted to make it as cheap as possible for the underwear trade and the lingerie trade, and cheap dresses. And when I went to Switzerland, I saw artificial fibers in fabrics that they made, that you couldn't tell the difference from silk. As the Japanese do now. They make all kinds of Ultrasuede. But otherwise...I make what is an orlon silk blouse that you can't tell the difference from silk, and it's washable, and the Japanese make that. They make it with care, and we made ours as cheap as possible. Later on, we made better things, but when it first came out, they catered to the lowest common denominator for dresses and underwear and things of that sort. It came out first, as you know,
in stockings and...nylon stockings were fine, but the earlier rayon stockings were horrible. They were stretchy and people forget that they even wore rayon stockings.

Q: I would like to hear about some of the awards that you've had because I do think it's important that there has been recognition of your talents. So would you talk about those?

The first major award was the Coty special award in 1951. But then after that, the 1955 award was the Neiman Marcus Award.

A: Yes. Well, that was a very nice distinction. Grace Kelly at the time, one of our leading actresses, won it for being the best dressed Hollywood star. And she did change Hollywood, the looks in Hollywood, completely, I think, with her simplicity and her elegance. In Rear Window and all these wonderful movies she was in, she wore the most beautiful clothes, all done by Edith Head. And I met Edith Head through Grace later on, and she's my kind of designer; very classic and very elegant. And I think that Grace did add--the little white gloves, and the simplicity of her hair, brushed back. And she quite deservedly won that prize. And Balmain the French designer for his lovely clothes, and I won it for simplicity in American clothes. And there was another young woman at the time, who won it for children's.. Lee, I think...

Q: Helen Lee.

A: Helen Lee. She won it for children's wear. Those were the four or five. And actually, I had met Grace Kelly, before, and we became very good friends there. She asked me to go up to her room with
her, and she said, "I don't like to leave all of these people by myself, would you walk out with me?" And I said, "I hate large parties, anyway."
This was after the ceremonies, and there was this big party going on. And I said, "Oh, I'd be delighted to leave. I don't like big gatherings of people." So both of us went up to her room. She said she had to go up; she was expecting a telephone call. She went into the bedroom to answer her phone and I think, it was Rainier that was calling her but I didn't know it at the time. That was '55.

Q: I thought it was '55.

A: '55. They were married in '56. '55 it was. And I guess it was maybe November, '56, that I was in New York and there was one of these great parties going on. I was with some friends at a table and Grace and Rainier walked up the aisle. Grace spotted me and came over and said, "Oh, how nice to see you. I haven't seen you for so long, and I want to introduce you to Prince Rainier." And the next day their engagement was announced. But they walked on, and I read about their engagement in the paper the next day. Then I realized that that was the important telephone call that she had to go up to answer, when we won the award. She came back to New York after they were married. I didn't go to the wedding. But before Caroline was born, she and Rainier came to New York. We had mutual friends and I met her again, with Rainier at a party. He hates big parties as much as I do, and it was one of the bridesmaids who was giving the party. It was in a charming apartment, but quite small and with an awful lot of people. Rainier was in a corner and I walked over to him and I said, "You don't like crowds any-
more than I do." And he said, "How do you think we can get out of this?"
And I said, "Let's leave, when Grace leaves." So we waited a little
while, and then left. I gave a small dinner party at my dining table,
which only holds seven people. Rainier had said, "Why is it everybody
asks you to small parties and it turns out to be 100 people?" So I
said, "Well, I'm going to give a small dinner party," and Grace came
and Rainier and Grace's mother. My son was not married then, and he
was here, and I was here and somebody else was here; Perhaps, it was a
bridesmaid of hers; I can't remember. The strange part of it was they
arrived and the table was set here, Rainier, his body guard, a wonderful
guy, was with him and also a very good friend of Grace's from California.
They all came. And they were not invited; everybody thought it was
going to be a big party and everybody came. And I looked, and I had a
little table over in a corner, because I couldn't get anymore at my dining
table. It turned out to be a delightful evening for me, and evidently
for Rainier. He especially loved it because it was small enough that he
felt at home with all his friends around him; nobody that he didn't know.
I think Grace was six months pregnant at the time with Caroline, and they
invited me over for the christening. So I went over for the christening,
and I think it was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life.

Q: I can see why you say the Neiman Marcus award in a sense
changed your life.

A: Oh, it did change my life. Because meeting Grace made a
great change in my life. Like Grace and like Rainier, I don't like big
parties at all. Meeting Rainier and liking him as much as I did--(he's
about the same age as my son)—, I felt very comfortable with him. And I do speak French. When I went over there, it was easy for me to get along. I love it over there. But it changed my life in many ways, not just one way.

He had a financial advisor, who had come over that first visit, with Grace and Rainier...Oh, he was the extra man.

Q: At the dinner table.

A: It wasn't her bridesmaid. And this man took a liking to me and when I went back for Caroline's baptism, he courted me relentlessly. When a Frenchman really falls in love with you, I tell you, he does it expertly; or at least Pierre Ray did. I've never felt so pampered or loved or cozzened (and old fashioned word). He was an enchanting man too. He'd been a widower for three years and his daughter was a little bit jealous in some respects of the relationship after a while, and for that reason we never married. Not only that, I had my business in New York. We had a lovely romance, but unfortunately he died of cancer. It's just as well we never married because I would not want to be attached to his children or grandchildren. This way we had a beautiful five or six years together. And we traveled with Grace and Rainier all over. He had traveled with them, and we went to Scotland together, we went to London together, we went to... Every winter we went skiing. We went on the boat with Rainier, the Dio Valente, his wonderful yacht, on a Mediterranean cruise, always with a small entourage. And meeting people that you would never have met before. Meeting Arturo Lopez in Naples, and he had his boat right next to Rainier's. We were invited on his yacht. And Rainier's "Dio Valente" was a marvelous
boat. It was very what I call "boaty"; you know, not done in any fancy fashion. The cabins were very simple and very comfortable. Everything was very comfortable and simply done. And you knew you were on a boat. When you got on Arturo's boat you would have thought you were in a French seraglio. French furniture all over and crystal chandeliers. You couldn't imagine you were on a boat! It was really a floating palace. But Rainier had the great discretion to like boats enough to keep them looking like boats. And we had many a beautiful voyage on the boats he had, meeting so many people. I met the Waldheims, through Grace and Rainier.

Q: Kurt Waldheim.

A: Yes. Kurt Waldheim. I met Frank Sinatra and his adorable wife. I met Cary Grant. All the people from Hollywood who knew Grace, either here in New York or in Monaco, with Grace and Rainier.

Q: You really must have been among the first people who combined the excitement of designing with the excitement of a social world that was really very interesting.

A: Well, I had to go abroad anyway very often. When we were in Scotland, I was buying fabric, in London, I visited Liberty Silks. I was there not just visiting; I was on business. When I went to Switzerland, I used to buy knitted goods and laces and things in Switzerland, so I'd be in Switzerland buying and then I would stay for a week or ten days holiday with Grace and Rainier while I was there. And it was a beautiful, close relationship, and I think it was because I liked Rainier so much, as well as Grace. The intimacy of the financial advisor--he was like a second
father to Rainier, or an uncle or something. A very close relationship to Rainier. And they did have a terrible time with photographers, as everybody knew. And when the children came, I was there when Caroline and Albert were born and went to their christenings, and stayed with them. And I did have, for a little while, a flat in Monaco, which I gave up later on. But later I went to the palace, because I adored the children and I was like a second governess around the palace half the time. I loved staying with the children, and they felt more comfortable if I was there and they had to go off somewhere. A couple of times they'd have a new governess and she wouldn't be...Fortunately I was there one time when they hired a governess who had never been a governess before and she was absolutely awful. I was so happy I was there at the time because Albert...Stephanie was quite little at the time and the governess was really pretty ghastly. The children were fantastic children, beautifully brought up and just mischievous enough...

Q: It sounds great. I think we might get back to some more pedestrian things. But I know that in 1970 the Smithsonian had a retrospective of your things. It's very interesting they did a retrospective, because that isn't something that the Smithsonian does, or at least they had not previously done that kind of thing very often, I believe.

A: That was the first one they did on clothes. They've done them since, I think. I was very lucky. I knew Dick Howland, who was one of the curators...And he liked my clothes and decided to have a showing.

It was interesting to me because it was the first time I had
ever seen my clothes from the 1930s on. It was done in a fashion show, you know, underneath the American flag. A big American flag, in the Smithsonian. It's one of the biggest American flags ever made, hanging in the center. And they put a platform in front of that, and I rented from a florist an enormous amount of plants to put in front of it to make it very graceful. It was rather like doing a fashion show in a barn, but if I have to do something like that I don't leave it up to other people to do it, and I...They don't have the resources. And I decided that I had to be very proud, being shown there. I spent a fortune on plants. I even had an alleyway done with plants for when the guests arrived...instead of just open halls...I felt that would have been abhorrent, you know. I had a little stairway up on a platform in front of the flag. It was quite nice.

Q: In 1980, at The Museum of the City of New York you had a special show in the Vera Maxwell gallery. Is that right?

A: The Museum of the City of New York gave me the same kind...Well, that's a different kind of a show. The Smithsonian was an actual fashion show, of my clothes, my archives, and things they had, which are never allowed out anymore. They allowed them to be shown in the fashion show; otherwise they would never be shown again. They're in the archives of the Smithsonian. The same thing happened at The Museum of the City of New York. They had just built a floor of fashion. My show was the first one they did on their fashion floor. And it is so tiny, you know. The Museum of the City of New York is tiny, and I think they showed things from the thirties, the weekend wardrobe, which every-
body loved. They wanted to buy it. And as you came in they had my first Vogue suit, which is 1940, I think, a little tweed suit. They showed that. And that's an interesting story.

In 1940 or '41 we couldn't get any fabrics. They were all held up. You couldn't get grey flannel. And being resourceful, I remembered somewhere...I was always interested in how books are made, and I think I was up in Boston somewhere...It might have been Philadelphia. Anyway, that's not important. But I went to a place where books were printed and made, printing pressed. And they need...They needed then (I don't know how it's done now since the 1940s) a certain kind of fabric that had no dye in it to press the paper on it. It's vague now, it's been so long ago. But I remember these great long sheets of fabric that were on this table where they print on. And I asked and they said, "Oh, yes. It's all natural fiber." It was a peculiar shade of brown-grey; it had no color at all, because it was a mixture of every natural lamb's wool that you could find. And I found out where it was made and I used it, and it got on the cover of Vogue. It's a rather mottled tweed.

Q: You really do have extraordinary powers of observation to have noticed a thing like that fabric being used for...

A: Well, we needed it so badly. You couldn't get wool. It was all for the soldiers. You couldn't use zippers, because of metal. You had to go back to snaps or buttons. Buttons and button holes. But that fabric was incredible. I loved it as a matter of fact. It was an odd shade. You couldn't tell whether it was grey or brown or...It was
a mixture of grey and brown. An I used it for a couple of years. Maybe two years, until we were able to get fabrics again. But I did get it on the cover of Vogue. And that's the one they showed in the front when you came into the Museums.

Oh, it was rather nice. Because an enormous amount of old friends came out and I made friends with my old friends again who came for the anniversary as well.

Q: You're talking about the Museum presentation. Yes. Right.
A: And I donated for the Museum. They're always in need of money. It's a lovely museum, The Museum of the City of New York. JoAnn Olian was the one who did this, who liked my clothes very much.

Q: And you also made a financial contribution to the Black Fashion Museum, so that's an extension of your interest in museums.
A: Yes. Well, Lois Alexander's a charming woman and does an enormous amount of work for black designers. They're doing a big show at the Plaza.

Q: This weekend I think it is. I'm not sure it's at the Plaza.
A: It's some big hotel, some place. But she's doing an enormous thing. They have clothes up there that are incredible that were made by black seamstresses for President's wives. They have charming things up there and I give them great credit. That's why I try to help her out as much as I can. They need help, those people. I like to do small charities. I like to see where my money is going. I don't like to hand checks out without knowing who's going to use it or what it's going to be used for.

A: That's all very much a part of your philosophy which really
involves involving yourself.

Q: You have to involve yourself. Another thing I'm terribly interested in is Covenant House, who take the young, sort of street girls and boys who get involved immediately with drugs or prostitution, and Covenant House is marvelous. Father Ritter, really...I tell every rich woman I know, I don't care how little she gives but please give something to Covenant House. They need it desperately. They do such a beautiful job. Taking those little waifs. And they're all so young; it's shocking. And unfortunately, if they've been on drugs for three years, it's very, very difficult. But by and large they rescue...Many of the boys and girls who are working there now, even some of the administrators, are people who were rescued fifteen years ago. That's marvelous. It's so efficient and wonderful. To think that they can get pulled out of misery and a life of degredation, and now are doing something and are very proud of themselves. It's a marvelous institution.

Q: Would you like, as sort of a final subject here, just to talk about what you might say to young people concerning what they need to do to achieve a degree of success in the world of fashion? What are the qualities?...You have really mentioned them without specifically stating...

A: Well, observation and dedication, observation and the will to never give up. You need an enormous amount of staying power, I think, to do anything. I don't care whether you want to be a writer or an actress or a designer...Staying power, a will to do what you've decided to do, and the will to keep up with it, and take a few hard knocks. But
observation, I think, in acting must be very great, tool You observe people doing things and bring it out in a part that you play.

Q: Well, not everybody can observe the things you observe, like the fabric used by a printer, but that's...

A: That's the power of observation. I mean, it's using your eyes. It's as simple a thing as using your eyes and your brain at the same time, and make them both work for you.

Q: And that really is one of the great qualities that you think are necessary; are useful.

A: They are. It's nice to hear some kind of background as well. I don't think it means everything in life, but... Not that we were very wealthy. I came from a very, very modest family. But we did read. I think reading is probably one of the things that we've forgotten to do. I'm glad they're bringing McGuffey's reader back into grammar schools, or primary schools, I should say. Because I don't think that since the '60s we've taught children to read. And if you can't read... If I didn't like books so much I would never have found my cloth. I was so enamored of books, I wanted to find out how they were made one time. It is...

Q: Inter-related.

A: Inter-related. Yes.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: You're welcome.