ORAL HISTORY LIBRARY, F.I.T.

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

BEN SHAW

(ALSO SEE JERRY SHAW INTERVIEW AS PART OF THIS ORAL HISTORY)

Dates of Interviews

January 6, 1982
January 8, 1982

Interviewed by

Mildred Finger
Ben Shaw has played a unique role in the garment industry. After learning how to be a successful dress manufacturer, and with in-depth experience in all phases of the business, he became, for many years, the person most sought after to set-up, organize and administer businesses for talented designers. Once these businesses were launched, he would start with yet another designer and again repeat the process.

Among the many designers with whom he has been affiliated are Oscar de la Renta, Geoffrey Beene, Donald Brooks, Sarmi, Giorgio St. Angelo, Stephen Burrows, Dominic Rompollo.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## BEN SHAW

### ORAL HISTORY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TAPE 1</th>
<th>Page Range</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - 3</td>
<td>Childhood and adolescence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - 8</td>
<td>Entered business working for his mother; description of contractor's activities from about 1915-1920</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 - 15</td>
<td>Employment by various manufacturers with description of their businesses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 - 23</td>
<td>Backed by a wealthy patron, Ben Shaw enters business with a partner; description of activities for next several years, from about 1917-1925</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 - 30</td>
<td>Employed by variety of firms with ever increasing responsibilities and earnings growth. Description of various successful specialty stores of that period</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 - 40</td>
<td>Start of ELFREDA, headed by Ben Shaw from 1931-1954. Description of finances</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 - 45</td>
<td>Developed relationship with French couturier Pierre Balmain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46 - 47</td>
<td>Discussion of Fashion Originators' Guild, founded by Maurice Rentner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48 - 54</td>
<td>Discussion of relationship with Balenciaga</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued...)
TABLE OF CONTENTS

BEN SHAW

(Continued...)

55 - 57 Attempt to develop business with Pierre Cardin
58 Association with Jane Derby

TAPE 2

59 - 64 Amplified explanation of closing of Weinman, Gardner, and
Schwartz and, later, of Elfreda
65 - 67 Ben Shaw in business with Jane Derby. Organization becomes
Oscar de la Renta.
68 - 85 Ben Shaw develops new method of working with various designers:
Geoffrey Beene, Norell, Donald Brooks, Halston, Dominic Rompollo,
Rizkallah, Albert Capraro, Giorgio St. Angelo, Stephen Burrows
85 - 93 Ben Shaw discusses store relationships, unions, production
93 - 95 Brief description of family life
95 - 105 Philosophy about various elements of manufacturing
Q. Mr. Shaw, could you start telling me, first, something about who your family was, where you were born and your childhood and growing up generally?
A. I was born in Russia.
Q. When?
A. I came to this country when I was two years old. I was born April 14, 1898.
Q. So you came here in nineteen hundred?
A. That's right. I came here in 1900 and we were four brothers, no, three brothers and one was born in this country. They were musicians and one was a lawyer and I decided to help my mother in the dress business.
Q. Was she in the dress business?
A. Yeah. In the contracting dress business at 120 Fifth Avenue.
Q. How did she get started in that?
A. Well, originally, she made a livelihood by doing dressmaking work at home and when she built up the clientele and made sufficient money, she went to 120 Fifth Avenue originally with a partner. Then it seems that the man had to go back to his country, Russia or Poland, and she took over the entire business contracting for large, actually called jobbers in those days.
Q. Was your father in that business too?
A. He came to help her later. He was in the cap making business. And then, the people we sold were like G.B.G. in the early days and Mark Singer, all the big jobbers that were around that area from Eighteenth Street up to Thirty-Third Street. There were quite a few jobbers and she would only work, because she had twelve machines for a few of them each season; you didn't make any money on them; but you made the money on the fabrics.

Q. Oh? How....

A. See, becau....

Q. Yeah. Tell me about that. How, how did you do that?

A. See, in those days the mills allotted the manufacturers or the people they distributed fabric to, a certain allotment, and once that allotment was over, the mills would close down and produce that amount of yardage that they were able to....

Q. About what year was that?

A. ...Had the capacity of delivery. Nineteen fifteen.

Q. At which point you were about seventeen years old?

A. In fifteen I was seventeen.

Q. Right.

A. Correct.

Q. Before we go into that some more, could you go back a little bit? Where did you go to school?
A. P.S. 62.

Q. Where was that?

A. Today it's called Seward High School on Hester and Essex Street.

Q. So you went to High School but before that you went....

A. No. I went to public school there, they had from 7B, they had 8A and 8B there, see? I went to P.S. 75 prior, which was around the corner on Norfolk Street, and then I finished the last two years at that school and I graduated, called, it's called Seward High School today; it was P.S. 62 in my days and I had, just had about a month of Stuyvesant High School and then I decided to go into making my livelihood, without really a good education. In later years I had private tutors and did some night school, went to night school to catch up with the things I missed in life.

Q. But when you were seventeen, you were working with your mother?

A. Yes.

Q. And how long had she been in that business?

A. Oh, I'd say about four years. See, while I was with my mother after being there about a year, I decided to design some of my own ideas and not being very knowledgeable, I went to Traphagen to learn how to sketch.
Q. Did you really?
A. Yeah. You know I learned to make croquis and learned dimensions and about how to put a garment together; and also about the measurements of a garment. In those days the measurements were a little bit different than they are today. But the labor was so good that it was very easy to learn and to be capable of making clothes. It was much easier because the labor were all experienced labor. In those days they were all Europeans, you know, the Russians or Polish or from Austrian countries and Irish and....

Q. Had your mother, herself, learned this in Europe?
A. Oh, she knew that in Europe, yes. That's why she was a good dressmaker because she knew the business. She must have started when she was about six years old by being an apprentice for somebody and working her way up.

Q. When she came over here before, she opened up this business that you were talking about, how did she make the money to open it up?
A. I told you, by having people as clients; little by little one would tell the other; one woman would tell another woman that they could have the skirt fixed here or their blouse made here or that she would make dresses for them. In those days, she got very little money for her work;
maybe a quarter to do a hem.

Q. So she started, really, as a kind of custom dressmaker?

A. No. As a dressmaker and then later people had confidence in her so they let her make an entire dress. But she had that knowledge; she was actually brought up as a dressmaker.

Q. Uh, huh. So she started as a dressmaker with a shop and then....

A. Oh, this goes back maybe, let's see, she didn't go into business until I was about fourteen years old when she finally met this man that she went into business with as a fifty-fifty partner.

Q. I see.

A. In the contracting business. Now I've got to go back to how she made her money.

Q. Yeah, right. Uh, huh.

A. See, the jobbers used to take advantage of you (with low labor payments) so you'd make money on the fabrics. Once the mills would close, the price of the fabrics would jump, e.g. the average price was four dollars or five dollars because everything was pure silk or pure wool (no synthetics in those days) so the price of fabrics jumped as high as eight dollars a yard,
almost double, and people would come around to buy up whatever remnants you'd have, yardage and remnants, (Once the mills shut down to produce what had been sold). They'd pay you almost seven or eight dollars a yard for it. That's how the money was made because if people were so busy (there were very few manufacturers in those days, maybe two hundred, two hundred fifty so....)

Q. And were most of her manufacturers in the same way, I mean, people who had a few machines and a few...?

A. No, these manufacturers, most of them had maybe a plant on the premises, like we worked for J. Hyde and Sons, (I don't think you would know the names) and Mark Singer. Mark Singer didn't have any machines in his place, maybe two or three just to do repairs, but, but J. Hyde had machines, G.B.G. had some machines and....

Q. And they would prepare the designs and...?

A. They'd give us their garment, they'd give us their garment and their yardage and the pattern. We didn't make the pattern for them in those days except for certain people; the patternmakers were very low paid in those days. So, they'd make the mark on a single garment. Then when we'd lay it out, we'd make up
two or three and that's where it is she really made her real money.

Q. Because they really didn't pay very much for the labor?
A. Very little; and we paid very little to have the garment made. The perfection of the labor was so great in those days as they were all very experienced people.

Q. And were these mostly dresses that were being made?
A. We made only dresses.

Q. Only dresses.
A. Yeah.

Q. Right.
A. The only thing we made that was different was Tricolet. When Tricolet came into the picture, that was the first thing with Rayon that we handled and we had a lot of problems because it would stretch anywhere from six to eight inches after the garment was finished. You know, it took many years for the perfection of that fabric.

Q. Tricolet? T R I C O L E T ?
A. Correct. What else can I tell you about that? While in my mother's business, I learned a little bit about clothes and how to design; I designed some clothes; I made them up; and I even went on the road with the clothes.

Q. How many samples did you make?

- 7 -
A. About eight. But travelling was so cheap so I made the trips to see store buyers.

Q. By train?

A. By train; there was no other way. And I would have a drink with other salesmen, and they would give me the direction where to go and who to see and I'd come back with quite a bit of business. We didn't have sufficient money to be able to deliver and buy the amount of fabric needed. The duty on embroidery then and to this day is so high because I think then we had as many embroidery people as there were dress people.

Q. In this country?

A. In this country. They did embroidery for blouses. I think there were just as many embroidery people as other workers. In the beginning when I was associated with my mother, I helped her after school. For the first couple of years when I finished school I worked full time. During that period of time, I was the one that would go out to try to get these jobbers to give us work. That's how I got acquainted with those jobbers. One of them by the name of S.B. Cassidy, who was in the cloak and suit business, opened a firm called Horowitz and Co. down on Eighteenth
Street. It's so many years back, I'm glad I remember what I'm going to tell you.

Q. Yes, I understand.
A. The name of the jobber's firm was Cassidy and Dorfman.
Q. Cassidy and Dorfman?
A. They had cloaks and suits, it was very... It was a very large concern. In those days a big volume business ran into the millions of dollars. We took a liking to me because of my going up there all the time to show my clothes and trying to get work from him. He offered me a job to come to work for him in the business called Horowitz and Company on Eighteenth Street.
Q. This is while you were still with your mother that you got this offer?
A. Yeah. Then when I got that offer, I told my mother I was going to leave her, but that I'd still be able to give her plenty of work.

Q. Was this after you had begun to travel with your designs?
A. I had only made one trip.
Q. You made one trip and then Cassidy and Dorfman...?
A. I brought back the business but we didn't have enough money to really go into it on a big scale. With the amount of business I did, we didn't have enough money to buy what we needed to produce enough clothes.
Q. Right. So then Mr. Cassidy came to you and saw....
A. He came along and made me this offer. I went to work for him and gained a great deal of experience because he was an exceptionally clever man. Cassidy wasn't his proper name. He had a Russian name but they couldn't pronounce it so they called him Cassidy. He was one of our biggest coat and suit manufacturers in New York City. As I'm an Aries, you know I was never happy with any one job so I'd travel around and get different types of jobs. That's how I got into the field with bigger jobs all the time. I met a man by the name of Ben Gordon, who....

Q. You were still at Cassidy at that point?
A. Yeah. And when I met Ben Gordon, I left Cassidy because Ben Gordon had sold me a proposition that we could do a big business and he'd have sufficient money to finance it. It was on Thirty-seventh Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue, and all the houses in those days were all stoops, you know, with big plate windows in the front....

Q. Had the industry already begun to move uptown that way?
A. No. In those days, the industry didn't come uptown 'til about nineteen twenty-two.
Q. And this was when?
A. Oh, this goes back to nineteen eighteen, nineteen....
Q. When the war was over?
A. Right. Nineteen-eighteen. So Mr. Gordon invited me to see his plant. He had two machines, but in those days if you had two good operators, they'd work till twelve o'clock at night or maybe two in the morning, and they would get two bushlers and two more assistants to do the sewing of the linings and the sewing, the finishing; and they did all the work which was very important; they would make the garment, the others would do the finishing and the busheling and the....
Q. By now, you're in the coat business? Right? Coats and s....
A. Yes. No. Still the tailored dresses.
Q. Tailored dresses. Okay.
A. And this man was, at that time, about fifty-five and I was about nineteen or twenty. And there was a big sign on the outside window; you know what I mean by the stoops? They all had the stoops....
Q. Yes, I do know, indeed.
A. ...And you had to walk up the stoop and in a big plate glass window was the sign: Ben Gordon, Tailor. And he invited me to have lunch with him down in Chinatown.
In those days when you went to Chinatown, the meal was about sixty cents. And they had these beautiful mats on the table. Mats all embroidered in pure silk. You don't remember those mats, do you?

A. No I don't but they sound fantastic.

Q. They were about twelve inches square and while we were having lunch and eating the Chinese food, I kept looking at these beautiful mats and I got an idea that I could do something with them to trim up dresses. When I asked the man if he'd sell me some, he said, I'll be glad to; they were only sixty cents apiece. And then they had a band hanging from the ceiling with a big torso on it; the price was also sixty cents. So I bought them and Ben wanted to know what I was buying them for. I said, I'll take them back and we'll make some dresses out of them. And I made navy blue tricotene dresses. I don't know if you remember Chinese mats...?

Q. Yes, I think I know what they look like.

A. They had blue, a lot of blue different colors, you know, like pink and blue, but the background was either navy or black.

Q. You mean they were prints? You say the black....

A. No. All made my hand. All made by hand.
Q. Yes, but you say the background was black or blue...?
A. The background of the fabric.
Q. So they were prints?
A. No.
Q. You said, they were pinks and blues...?
A. Pinks and blues were colors of the threads they used...
silk thread....
Q. Embroidery!
A. Embroidery, yes. The embroidery was all made by the
silk thread and the whole thing was embroidered! You
know, that whole mat. So, I bought some of them. I
went back and made three dresses; one where I used as
pockets the entire mat; one where I cut the mat in tri-
gle shape and used pockets on the bottom and a pocket
on the top, and for one I used the band with a torso
for around the neck with the same mats on the pocket.
We went out in the market and I was selling them to
the jobbers, see? To the same people like Cassidy
and....
Q. Yes, right.
A. I've some other people I want to mention to you; Mark
Singer, and this time I sold Bill Abrams but later
became Bill of Morocco. I also went to a store called
Worth on Thirty Fourth Street; it was one of the best
specialty shops on the avenue.

- 13 -
Q. Worth?
A. Worth. Do I pronounce it properly?
Q. W O R T H.
A. You don't remember that store?
Q. I don't think I do.
A. He gave me an order for fifty pieces. He gave me an order for just as many as the jobbers did. But the reason the jobbers gave you a limited order was that then they'd send the garment out to be copied. A jobber would give me an order for twenty pieces or thirty pieces, while this store gave me an order for fifty pieces.
Q. How much did the dress wholesale for? Do you remember, approximately?
A. Gee, I really don't remember, but I can tell you it was made out of pure wool gabardine. The fabric was a lightweight gabardine, and we had just about enough money to fill those orders. Now that sixty cent mat I bought went up in the market to six dollars apiece so Cassidy bought up the whole market. The man must have made about ten thousand dresses; I didn't make them, he must have made about ten thousand dresses of those few styles, or more. In those days for a retailer to buy a hundred, two hundred or three hundred dresses
of a number meant nothing, you know. And so I said to Ben, we haven't got enough money and we have got to get some money so we can do a bigger volume of business. We need more operators working for us.

So I put an ad in the paper: Young man, designer, with good following, looking for partner with money.

Several days later, somebody stopped in front of my place of business. I couldn't help but see through the big plate window on the ground floor. A woman walked out of a car (chauffeur driven car). She walked out... a very beautiful woman by the name of Mrs. Ross. She lived on West End Avenue. In those days you had to be really rich to live there.

Q. This is at the Thirty Seventh Street building?

A. It's still Thirty Seventh Street. And, as she walked into the place and turned around, there was a little man behind her who was the President of Brunswick Ball Colander Company.

Q. Brunswick?

A. In those days it was called Brunswick Company. You know, they made billiard tables, pool tables, and billiard balls. It's a very large firm even today but the name is changed; it's Brunswick Ball Colander. I think I'm right.
She looked around, didn't say a word, she kept looking and looking; and she finally said to me, after I introduced her to the salesmen, and to Ben Gordon, "How much money would I need?" and I said (I really didn't know what to ask her). I think ten thousand dollars will be sufficient....

Q. Ten thousand dollars?

A. Ten thousand dollars. Well, in those days, ten thousand would be equivalent to seventy five thousand today. So she left us a check for three thousand dollars, and told us she had to go away for a vacation. The reason was she was getting a divorce from her husband and was very nervous. She wanted to have something to do, and the doctors advised her to go into business and to spend time in the business as often as possible as a cure. And that's the reason she made that investment. So she left us three thousand dollars that day and said she'd be back several weeks after vacation to give us the money. She did so, and then we became a real independent firm.

Most of my accounts used to be on Forty Second Street. In those days, Forty Second Street had all fine stores, they had Mignon Dress, Bresher, Aukins, Swaldum, Louis Bernstein, Hyman Berman, Robinsons, and Stern Brothers was on that street but I didn't bother selling them
because I got enough business out of these stores I mentioned to you. The Gaiety Gown Shop was another store....

Q. All of these stores selling at retail and not making their own merchandise?
A. They were strictly retail stores. That street was the busiest street in New York City in those days.

Q. Forty Second Street between what avenues?
A. Between Sixth and Fifth. And, Hyman Berman was around the corner and the Gaiety Shop was around the corner. In those days the stores would give you orders for two hundred pieces, three hundred pieces, one hundred pieces, quicker than they give you today. The buyer, when she gives you a hundred pieces today, is worried. She hopes she sells them. You know, you ask the Mignon boys, you know the Mignon boys?

Q. Yes, very well.
A. Their father owned the store and he owned the Beverly Gown Shop. I had a direct phone with the store because of how much volume of business we used to do. And we were very successful; now we needed a larger plant to do the manufacturing so we moved to Sixth Avenue; then we started selling other people.

Q. Sixth Avenue and where?
A. Between Thirty Seventh and Thirty Eighth and....
Q. And the name of the firm was still...?
A. Still Gordok Dress. Instead of Ben Gordon....
Q. Yes.
A. ...We called it Gordok Dress. G O R D O K.
Q. Gordok Dress.
A. And, I learned a great deal from that woman. When Mrs. Ross came back, I learned a great deal from her because she was very knowledgeable and a very smart woman.
Q. Knowledgeable about clothes?
A. She was also very knowledgeable about real estate. She owned a great deal of real estate. She'd take me to the places where she'd have to collect her money. She owned real estate on Eighth Avenue and Ninth Avenue. And then, Mr. Gordon, when we made a great deal of money, told me he didn't think I was deserving of a full third of the business because I was so young.
Q. Is that what your arrangement had been? That he got two thirds and you one third?
A. No. She got a third and Mr. Gordon....
Q. ...He got a third and you got a third?
A. And, just as I told you, being an Aries, I decided I'd take a settlement and leave him. Mrs. Ross begged
me not to go. In fact, she took me out to dinner several times and she really taught me a way of life because I didn't know anything about these fancy restaurants where the checks in those days were big, like the old Pekin and the old Churchills and the old Hotel... Do you know where the Bond Store is today?

Q. Yes.
A. I think that hotel was called the Ritz Carlton? I think it was.

Q. It could be.
A. ...It was the kind of a place where on Friday night you couldn't get into the dining room or on the dance-floor, unless you had black-tie, so she made me go out and buy a tuxedo since we three used to go around so much--they were always together.

Q. You mean the man who headed that company you talked about?
A. Yes. Brunswick Ball.

Q. Right.
A. They were very interesting people. They taught me a great deal, they really were better teachers for me than the ones I had in school.

Q. She really liked you a lot and felt that you had a lot of talent?
A. Oh yeah, she did. She had two grown up children, one was at war. When he came out he must have been about nineteen years of age. She also had a daughter. They were wonderful people and immensely wealthy. I took a settlement from Ben Gordon. I settled for very little money (only ten thousand dollars) because I just wanted to get away from him. After I left, they lasted a year and a half. They had a good clientele, a good business, but I was really the front man....

Q. You had been doing the designing, and what else?

A. In those days I did all the designing although I wasn't an original designer; you know, I used to go around and get ideas from store windows and just make little changes or no changes at all because the clothes were very simple. It's interesting, isn't it?

Q. Fascinating. So you used....

A. So let me tell you. I even get excited myself, telling it to you if you want to know the truth.

Q. Good.

A. And?

Q. Ben, how long had you been with Mr. Gordon?

A. Oh, at least two and a half years.

Q. Oh, okay, and....

A. Yeah. I went into business with him.
Q. Sure.
A. He had lied to me; my mother thought he was a liar and she didn't like him at all.

Q. What did he lie to you about? What do you mean?
A. He had said that he had money. He was a kind of an artist who walked around (bald headed, flat footed) with the pinch back jackets and little Between the Acts in his mouth all the time, never taking them out, so you can picture that face and big bow ties he used to wear. That's the type of character he was. I made him a very important man by getting the retail trade in. Selling the trade in those days was very easy. You know I sold Madam Frances. Later on I sold Malcolm Starr's mother and....

Q. Really, Mrs. Frank Starr?
A. And Mr. Mann. See, all these businesses that I'm talking about like Mann or Frances and, and the Gaiety Gown Shop; in later years there was nobody like those people. They would service the stagedoor Johnny's. In those days those men would hang around the theatres to take these beautiful girls out after the show. They would take them to these dressmakers I told you about, and buy them dresses. Then the girls would bring the dresses back and get the cash for them.
Didn't you know that?

Q. Yes, I think I knew something about that.

A. Ah, you know, Madam Frances became the richest, Malcolm Starr's mother was about fourth I think, or fifth. That's where she made a lot of money. You know, I'm talking about dresses that were expensive in those days. Later, I beaded those dresses: beading alone used to cost a hundred fifty or two hundred dollars.

Q. So, they would sell the girls the dresses, the girls would return them, and they'd give them less money I suppose?

A. Oh, sure.

Q. So that they made up the difference, the retailers made the difference.

A. They made fortunes in those days. It was very easy making money in those days; it was different from today. Then later on, the only ones that remained were Pauline Turner, and Wilma; and there was another one on Madison Avenue. Also, do you know Reuben's Restaurant.

Q. Yes, sure.

A. In those days, he had a place on Broadway in the seventies and what made him famous was that Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor would go behind his counter after the
theatre and make the sandwiches. That's how he got that big clientele. And he would sell the same Johnny's who would come around and buy the girls fruit. Anything durable they'd keep, but they'd buy a lot of fruit as well as a lot of canned stuff. He'd charge them exorbitant prices and they'd bring the food back--the same thing--that's how Reuben made his money in those days. You can't do it today. I think maybe there might be a few stores that do that, but I doubt it because those were different days.

Q. Now, you were still under twenty five if I calculated correctly.

A. Oh, sure. I'll tell you about when I was older. Now, when I left Ben Gordon, Cassidy took me back and he gave me a very good job. Of course all during that time I went up to my mother's place every once in a while to help her out and make sure she had enough work. I lived at home.

Q. Do you mean down to your mother's place? The business was still downtown?

A. Down at Seventeenth Street. But we had moved up to a Hundred and Twelfth Street, and we became very swell in an elevator apartment between Seventh and Eighth Avenue (or was it Columbus? I forgot.)
Seventh and Columbus, you know, that was....

Q. That was then lower Harlem? Right? That was a very wealthy area.

A. Oh, yeah. A very wealthy area. Yeah, we became very swanky. And, I want to tell you about my brothers; I'll tell you first about how I became more successful. I worked with S.B. Cassidy....

Q. Right.

A. ...Whose business grew from three hundred thousand and when I left him, I think he did about seven but later on the firm did twelve to fifteen million dollars a year.

Q. How much?

A. Twelve to fifteen million. It became a very big firm.

I was offered a big proposition by the firm called Brill of Moroco, the people I used to sell at one time through my mother's factory.

Q. Could you spell Brill of Moroco.

A. B R I double L and M O R O C O. The original firm was Bill Abrams but as years went on Abrams left and the firm was called Brill of Moroco. They gave me a very big proposition--now this is after the war. Most firms were caught with a lot of piece goods, and they had a base color gabardine or a....

- 24 -
A. A twill. It had a special name. It was a khaki color.
Q. Uh, huh.
A. Khaki or beige. And they had loads of yardage. I got the proposition, I went to work there and I made up one dress....
Q. This is at Brill of Morocco?
A. Brill of Morocco. I made up one style where I used a black braid on the khaki color tricotene. It was a pure wool fabric and I used the braid on a dirndl effect, an inch and a quarter braid then an inch and a quarter space, an inch and a quarter braid, an inch and a quarter space....
Q. Sounds lovely.
A. And it became the biggest thing we had. Of course, in those days Brill of Morocco had seven sales people working there. One man who worked there was Harry Richmond another was one of the Marx Brothers, Gummo. And then there were five other people who later became quite prominent people in the field. Later, Harry Richmond went back to his work as a prominent matinee idol; Gummo went into the dress business first and then he went back to California. I did very well in that firm; I was there for about a year and a half. An embroidery man named Sam Wilks put a check in my
pocket. I thought maybe it was a little graft or a little gift—but when I opened up the check it was for fifty thousand dollars. He said, I want to be in partnership with you; I want to go into business with you. That's when I went into business for myself with Wilks and with Leo Wyman, who worked for Brill of Moroco as the leading salesman. We started the business called Wyman, Gardner and Schwartz....

Q. Wyman, Gardner and Schwartz...?

A. My name was Schwartz in those days.

Q. Okay. Do you remember what year this was, Ben?

A. 1924 or 1925.

Q. 1924 or 1925. So you were about twenty six years old.

A. Yeah, that's right. We opened up at 8 West 33rd Street which was a very good building. That's one thing I always made sure of—to get into the right building. We were very successful. And, of course, people bought differently in those days. For example, Martin's of Brooklyn can't buy many pieces today of any one style. I used to ship them almost a thousand dresses a month of one style.

Q. How do you account for that enormous quantity?

A. Well, it's the neighborhood, you know. For example
on Grand Street with people just walking on the streets or 42nd Street which was always crowded... Martin's of Brooklyn was the best specialty shop there.

Q. But a thousand dresses of one style is a lot of dresses.
A. Oh, yes. A thousand dresses of one style. Beaded dresses. They'd back up a truck which would come around on Saturdays, and we'd ship all the merchandise out. There's also another very good account I had on Fifth Avenue called the Louis Gown Shop. Now, you never heard of them, did you?

Q. The Louis Gown Shop? No, I don't think so.
A. It belonged to the Liebermans who put up the Bonwit Teller building.

Q. The Arnold Constable Liebermans?
A. That's right. They bought Arnold Constable which was a big lemon. Right across the street from Arnold Constable there was a big specialty shop called Louis Gown Shop. It would be on the southwest corner of 40th Street and Fifth Avenue.

Q. Yes, I see.
A. Then it became a men's shop, I think the Knox Men's Store? But Louis Gown Shop's volume was so bit it was unbelievable. Then I used to sell Russkees; then there was a Mrs. Doctor on Fifth Avenue. Worth was
still in business in those days. It did big volume. I don't really remember what was the reason that they closed up, but the neighborhood changed a great deal as did 42nd Street. You don't see any good stores there anymore.

Q. No.

A. Now you only see twenty-five-dollar stuff—ten-dollar stuff—cheap stuff. We really had a party. There weren't so many manufacturers in those days. There were about three hundred altogether including jobbers. Of course, more manufacturers started coming into the picture after 1925 or 1926.

Q. Uh, huh.

A. They started moving to Seventh Avenue, most of them. And we were so successful that we finally got a place at 498 Seventh Avenue. We had a half of a big loft on the Seventh Avenue side.

Q. And the name of the company was...?

A. Wyman, Wilks and Schwartz. We did a very big job. In those days if purple was good you'd cut a lot; when you walked into the place, everything was purple; if pink was good, everything was pink. But I made most money on my beaded clothes which were my best sellers. It was easy for me to make them because the designers
of the beaders would come around with their ideas in sketches so....

Q. The beading was all done here? In New York?

A. ...All done here. In those days all the beading was done here. Deliveries were quick. I don't care what you paid for the garment. Deliveries were very quick and the work was very well done. Everything went very well until the crash of nineteen twenty nine. I was in Europe at the time. My partners felt badly for me when I was away; they thought they'd put the money up to save me in the Wall Street market....

Q. You already had investments; you were investing money in Wall Street?

A. Oh, yes; don't forget; when we moved into 498 Seventh Avenue, we were very well off. We made a great deal of money. When I got back from Europe, we still did very well despite the crash; but I decided to quit and get myself together 'cause of the big losses I took on Wall Street. Then I quit for a while, for about six months.

Q. This was when? In 1929?

A. This is 1929, the period between 1929 and 1930. I lived in Woodmere at that time. Six months later I went back into business, I met a man on the train
who was stuck with eight hundred beaver coats or seal coats; I don't know which fur it was because I wasn't a furrier. I didn't know much about furs. He told me the coats used to sell for eight hundred dollars apiece wholesale. I made a deal with him to buy them for a hundred fifty dollars apiece. That's what put me back into business again because I designed a dress to be ensembled with the fur coat. The value was so great that we had no problems selling the eight hundred coats and the dresses. That started me back in business again.

Q. Well now, were you doing that as part of his business? I mean did you go...?

A. No that's when I started Elfreda.

Q. That's when you started Elfreda. Who was the designer?

A. The designer was Elfreda.

Q. I see.

A. She worked for Molly Parnis. She left Molly Parnis and we made the deal for her to come with me. That's when I changed my name to Shaw, too.

End of Tape 1
A. She was a very good designer, but she was an elderly woman and decided to go back to her home town in the midwest after she made a great deal of money in Elfreda. But the name continued. The next designer I had was Charlie Cooper who was a great designer. We really did a very big business. Unfortunately, he fell in love with a young man who wanted to live in California, so he decided to move out there and I lost Charlie Cooper. But the business continued being good and the next designer I hired was a woman by the name of Mrs. Hill, who was the greatest designer I've ever had in my lifetime. She was so good that our business tripled in volume. Her clothes were fast selling, expensive clothes.

Q. Yes. Ben, I'd like to check a couple of things because Elfreda was a very important resource and an important name. About how many years did you operate that business?

A. Oh, a long time. From 1931 until about 1954.

Q. For you that's a very long time because, as you said yourself, you have always enjoyed moving around.

A. Yes.

Q. So it lasted over twenty years?
A. Right.

Q. It was a business in which your role was that of the administrator and the general director?

A. I did a great deal of production. I had learned a great deal about production because of my mother's business. As I went on in life, I was hired several times as a production man.

Q. And you also knew the fabric market.

A. Oh, very well.

Q. Right.

A. In those days it wasn't as complicated as it is today because of the amount of mills that were in business like Stehli and....

Q. Forstmann.

A. Forstmann.

Q. For woolens and....

A. And Mallinson's and pure silk people or pure wool people. We didn't handle synthetics until the late forties when DuPont started coming out with these synthetic fabrics.

Q. Or didn't that happen during the war? The synthetics?

A. I didn't buy anything. I didn't buy any during the war.

Q. I know that....
A. I don't remember buying any synthetics; I didn't want to handle them, I was scared. There were a lot of problems in the very beginning with the pressing. The adjustments were made later. You know, a lot of people took big losses. When I started using it, I took a very big loss on a certain grade of fabric and the firm that sold it to me, Tuller Brothers, took a very big loss. In fact, they made a fortune at first but they went broke later on selling that fabric because everybody sued them. My losses were very big on these synthetic fabrics. You had to learn how to use it, how to press it, how to perfect it. Meanwhile these mills that produced it had to learn themselves how to perfect the fabric. There was a lot of trouble. DuPont sold it to a lot of jobbers. The jobbers had to do the finishing themselves and the perfection of the fabric themselves, so they took losses.

Q. Now, when you talked about setting up Elfreda in 498 Seventh Avenue, about how much capital did it take in those days to start a firm of that sort?

A. Oh, I think I started the thing with thirty five, forty thousand dollars.

Q. Thirty five to forty thousand dollars?
A. Yes.

Q. And did you use contractors or did you own your own machines or...?

A. In those days I used contractors. They were better workers.... When you use contractors, they're responsible for the garment and they'd take the work when you need them. If you have your own factory and your own machines, you have to be sure that you supply them all year round with work or else it was very costly, you see. So it was cheaper in those days for me to use contractors. The work was very beautiful so it didn't make any difference. There wasn't any bad labor.

Q. Right. Well, would you take...?

A. I might have had six machines on the premises, you always do that.

Q. Yes. Would you take a few minutes and just explain what the running of that kind of a business was like in those days? You had a designer, you showed your collections, (how many a year?) How many buyers?

A. Four times a year we'd have our collections. It was easy selling. All you had to do was keep the door open and buyers came from all over. There was no problem as far as the sales were concerned; it
was very well taken care of. Of course, I hired a couple of salesmen.

Q. Did your salesmen get paid based on the orders taken or on the deliveries that were made?
A. They were on a weekly salary.

Q. In those days did you work directly with buyers or with store managers or owners or...?
A. That's when I got to know the buyers and then I got to know the stores.

Q. Did you work mostly with buyers or with merchandise managers?
A. Both. Merchandise men and the buyers of the stores.

Q. And if you had specialty stores, you worked with the owners?
A. Well, specialty stores would always want to get to me because I had knowledge of deliveries.

Q. How much volume did you do over the course of those years? I mean, what did it grow from? From what to what?
A. Well, we ran up to about five, six million dollars a year. When I had Charlie Cooper, it ran to about three, four million and then it went to about six million when I had Miss Hill.

Q. I mean, how did you work it? Did she go out and shop
the fabric market and pick her samples?

A. No. She worked for Maurice Rentner for many years, and unfortunately, she used to drink a great deal, so she weighed about three hundred and fifty or four hundred pounds. She had a beautiful face and very beautiful hands, but she was a caricature. But she was brilliant. She used to work mostly on little dolls which I had to buy her. She had two assistants. Her sampleroom consisted of, between tailors and dressmakers and assistants, about thirty people. But you can't do that today. If I had a woman like her today, I'd go broke within two months. But you see, you asked me about money; money was easy in those days. If you were well known to the banks....

Q. Did you work with banks, not with factors?

A. No, with banks. Mostly with Sterling National. There was a man there who would come up to my place and he'd spend a great deal of his time in my place because of the amount of money he used to loan me. He liked me and he liked the way my business was running so I didn't have any problem with money.

Q. Yes. So that you could be sure of a cash flow all the time?
A. We had no problem with the cash flow in those days. The turnover was always good and people would pay so much quicker than they pay today. Little specialty shops wouldn't stretch it for two, three, four months, they'd pay ten days after or maybe twenty days after and....

Q. Did that have anything to do with the size of the discount that was given?

A. No.

Q. For cash?

A. We gave the same discount. In those days you didn't bother very much with cash because your taxes were so low you didn't have to worry about cash. While I'm telling it to you, I'm thinking about those things and I'm even thinking about how much money I used to get from the banks which financed me without a problem. Until 1960, even when I went with other designers and opened up different companies, I never paid more than six percent interest. It always ran between....

Q. Six percent?

A. Always ran between five and six. So it was easy to roll over the money and roll over the business. Of course if you had to pay twenty percent, I couldn't talk the way I'm talking now.
Q. And if you worked with factors you would have been paying them...?
A. Oh, in those days it was six so you'd have to pay them about ten.

Q. Did you ever work with factors in your business?
A. No, in later years I did. As I said, Miss Hill originally was with Maurice Rentner for many years.
Q. Right.
A. A very clever designer. She was the one that originated a little suit that Maurice Rentner....
Q. Yes, the famous Rentner suit.
A. Made his fortune on. And when she came to me she made the same little suit, only it had these little insignias on the sleeves or on the collar. They were made out of beaded medallions for which I used to pay thirty-five dollars. Should I tell you some secrets?
Q. Sure.
A. Well, I used many of these medallions or embroidered insignias. An Indian who did embroidery came to see me. I asked him if he could make one of those things; I showed him the sample and he said, he could make it but it would take him six weeks to give me the answer. And he came back six weeks later with a
duplicate of the piece of embroidery I gave him to make, and it was perfect. Every bead was single beaded and all the silk embroidery perfect and the entire medallion was very cleverly done. I asked him how much would it be per piece? And he said I would have to buy four thousand, which scared the hell out of me immediately. And I said, how much will they be? He said, fifty-five cents apiece. So, I figured even if I used five hundred, I'd still be making money because it was too late to change the price of the suits because they were already mostly shipped. I gave him an order for four thousand and I had to repeat four thousand more. For example, I remember we had a dress with an insignia inspired by an Ingersoll clock. She bought it for a dollar and she did an embroidered thing based on the clock. Around the frame, all these little rhinestones and black thread for the numerals, and wherever she could, she placed something either the rhinestones or silk thread, to make a design. We did a very big business. Miss Hill was with me for about two years and then she took very ill again and she resigned.

Q. You must have had some very good designers because
you did stay in business there for over twenty years?

A. I hired Andrew Woods who was pretty good. But you see, her volume was so big--she was good on evening clothes....

Q. Mrs. Hill?

A. ...She used to make these little suits, which made a quick sale. People like Goldwater's used to buy an unbelievable quantity. The specialty shops were really great. We haven't got very many specialty shops on that style anymore. In 1954 I decided to retire and my wife and I went to Europe and then we decided to go to Hong Kong and Japan and to look for ideas so that if I came back and decided to go back into business again, I might do something different.

Q. How long had you stayed out of business?

A. Oh, I skipped something. After Miss Hill left me, the man I was associated with in Europe was Pierre Balmain.

Q. Ah, right.

A. He was very good. His dresses were beautiful, but too matronly and too....

Q. About what year was that? That was after the war?
A. That was between 1952 and 1954. Pierre Balmain was a wonderful man and a very good designer, but at that time he had a private clientele rather than a business clientele. You know, when people went to Europe, they'd go to all the other houses first: Christian Dior, Jacques Fath, Worth, all the old timers, Chanel; and very few would go to Pierre Balmain, though he was good. But for the individual he was great. My wife was a very fascinating and stylish woman and had a great deal of knowledge about clothes, but never was in the business. She saw a couple of scarves on one of the chairs of Pierre Balmain's place and she said, what are these things? He said, oh somebody left them here that manufactures them in Mazamet. And she tried them on and we decided we'd go into that scarf business, and bring it back to New York City. That's how Pierre Balmain started with me. Then I took his collection in, too. And I brought this scarf back, no, I went to Mazamet with Pierre Balmain. We had to go to Toulouse, and then from there go to the town called Mazamet which is a big town for pure wool or wool fabrics, or wool yarns. And we would have to buy the yarn. To buy
the yarn, we'd go on the corner where they would sell all these samples of the different ranches in Australia and you'd use a jewelers' magnifying glass, that little square glass that the jewelers use?

Q. Yes.

A. Fascinating. To select the kind of yarn, you would select for the shawl we were going to make. I placed an order for ten thousand shawls, but now I had to go to the factory that made those shawls. The name of the town is Bagneres-De-Bigotre, it was in the Pyrenees.

Q. Okay.

A. The town had little hotels for people who would go there for the "cure". It was a short distance away from Biarritz. We hired a car one day and went to Biarritz. It took an hour or an hour and a half to go. And I opened up the factory. Pierre Balmain placed an order just as big as I did, for the European countries.... which became very successful. When we ordered the second time over the telephone, the yarn wasn't the same as it was in the first order. You see, it had to be a certain quality yarn that looked like a velvet on
the outside.

Q. Now, excuse me, when you sold these shawls, you were still selling them from the premises of Elfreda?
A. Oh surely.

Q. And so buyers would come to you just for the shawls?
A. Yeah, it was a very successful operation. Even the second lot, though the quality wasn't as good and I paid the same price for it because it came from a different rancher, was very good. We sold every one of them. But Macy's found out where I got the shawl, and they were selling them for $16.75 and I was getting $29.75 so I decided to give up the shawl.

Q. You had not bought Balmain's ready-to-wear with the shawls?
A. Yes, at that time I took his ready-to-wear in.

Q. You did?
A. I really didn't pay much attention to his ready-to-wear; it was too complicated compared to the clothes I had. I had a separate department for them and.... But he was a very nice man, a very easy man to be associated with, and I did very well with him. And he made a great deal of money with me. I don't think Pierre Balmain, at that time, was a very rich man, but he was a wonderful man.

- 43 -
Q. Well in effect really, you were the first American that I know of to import French ready-to-wear or...
A. Yeah, right, I was.

Q. Franchised French ready-to-wear collection.
A. Yes. And I gave this shawl up. My wife begged me not to give it up. It's still the biggest thing all over Europe. You'll see that shawl in Italy; I saw it in Hong Kong, I saw it all over with Pierre Balmain's name on it. He continued with the shawl; I gave it up. My wife begged me not to give it up but I brought back something....

Q. Incidentally, when did it become Elfreda-Fox?
A. Oh, later when I started to travel I needed somebody to take care of the....

Q. In nineteen forty-five or thereabouts perhaps?
A. No.

Q. Just an idea?
A. Mr. Fox was a very nice man but he didn't know the business, he really didn't....

Q. Willie Fox?
A. Willie Fox.

Q. Yes.

A. He didn't know the business. He sold me an idea
how great he would be when I leave the States and how well he could take care of the business.

Q. But it was after the Second World War? Because you said it was when you began to travel?

A. Oh, yeah. Willie Fox didn't come to me until after 1950. Willie was only with me a year; I think fifty-three when I started to travel to Europe a great deal. I traveled to Europe starting in nineteen twenty-five. In those days, we had to go to Europe to look for fashion and that's where we learned how to copy a great deal. That was when I first started Weingarten and Rheinholtz and Schwartz, and we had a little girl who worked for us by the name of Fields who was a pretty good designer and I would take her with me to Europe. It was much easier in those days.

Q. So, you went there for design but you didn't....

A. Mostly to work with the couturiers....

Q. Right. Until the Second World War?

A. Yes.

Q. And then it had to stop.

A. No. Until the crash, then I stopped for a while, then I started going back again in the late 1950's
and then another war came....

Q. Right.

A. We had no problem in America because during the war, World War II, the dress people made a great deal of money. In those days, we had this wonderful guild called Fashion Originators Guild which Maurice Rentner was very much responsible for putting together. He spent a great deal of his time and life and money to get that thing all organized. When we had that very well organized, all the manufacturers, I must say, did very well because we didn't get into one another's hair, you know? In other words, you weren't allowed to copy anything; you had to sketch every garment to make sure it didn't conflict with other peoples' dresses and make sure that you didn't copy someone else. We would, in those days, tell the stores when to have their sales and what to mark the garments; and we had, I don't know how many shoppers we, the Fashion Originators Guild, had just going because we would make the stores send the copies back. And, then a couple of big stores got together and they sued the Fashion Originators Guild, as you know....
Q. Yes, it was forced out.
A. …And of course, the higher court threw us out.
   And also we used to copyright every dress and send
   it to Washington for copyright and that was thrown
   out too because the court ruled that dresses were
   made for thousands of years so there's nothing new
   in a dress unless it had a foreign substance, you
   know, a piece of steel or something like that, that
   would be different. You can't copyright a dress;
   a print you could copyright. An artist has a full
   right to a print.
Q. Wait, excuse me, before you retired though you had
   Willie Fox come in with you for a short time….?
A. A short time.
Q. …In Elfreda?
A. Yes. That's right.
Q. And he, I assume, was supposed to take over some of
   your duties?
A. Yeah, but I found his conversation was good but his
   experience in handling people was very bad.
Q. Okay. You also, in this period, had the Balmain
   ready-to-wear and the scarves, and then you closed
   up your business?
A. No. I sold it to..., I had another partner who did
the production. His name was Visioni.

Q. Oh, I see.

A. And he bought the business and I went out.

Q. Right. So you went out in about 1954. Made your trip....

A. I think it was 1954 when I retired, but when I travelled, I realized, not at the beginning but after about five or six months I got very fidgety, and I realized how much money you really need to live the way I lived. I knew that the amount of money, though it was a large sum, wouldn't last very long if I stayed away from business, so I decided to go back into business again. The man I wanted was Balenciaga. I thought he'd be the best showcase in New York City. Fortunately, my wife spoke languages very well, I didn't speak the language and, as you know, before we went anywhere, everytime we'd go to Europe, the first place my wife would go to to get some clothes made would be Balenciaga and then Chanel or Christian Dior; that's about all in those days that she was fond of. And Chanel always for that little knitted suit and a few other designers every once in a while. Sometimes, she'd get something made by Pierre Balmain
because we were so close, so... We stopped in Paris first, she bought some clothes to be made because her fittings would take six or seven weeks, as you know.

Q. Right.

A. That was the great love for Paris, to wait for your fittings. So, then we decided to go to the Far East including Japan, Bangkok, Macao and India. In India, we only spent a day because they had a terrible epidemic so we had to run away. However, we went to Japan first and we decided to have a wonderful time in Japan and enjoy it while we were there. We didn't have any problem because we knew very a Japanese man very well. He was Japanese, but he was in this country. He was educated in Harvard; his daughter worked for me as a model...

Q. I see.

A. ...She was Miss Japan of nineteen fifty or nineteen fifty two. She worked for me at Elfreda. We had a wonderful time; we got to know many people there because of this gentleman. We got to know many people and we also went around to visit some of the manufacturers.... We saw some knitted shawls there but nothing like the one we had. But my wife found a shawl there and we made a little knitted sweater
out of it.

Q. From a Japanese...?

A. Yes. And I placed an order for a thousand pieces thinking if I ever did go back into business, I'd be able to put it in the collection because the price was so reasonable. In those days, three and a half dollars a piece.... We had a very good time; then we went to Hong Kong and a lot of manufacturers, or a lot of people that must have heard about me came to see me at the hotel and they'd come up to show me their samples.

Q. These are Japanese manufacturers?

A. No, now this is in Hong Kong.

Q. Oh, Hong Kong.

A. Yes. Because it was just about the year that they were beginning to start manufacturing for other countries, for the United States mostly. I started getting telephone calls in Hong Kong from Balenciaga's lawyer. My wife would always say to me, Balenciaga 's lawyer is on the telephone, he wants to talk to you. I said, please talk to him because you speak the languages and I don't. I don't want him to tell Balenciaga anything different than I will tell him when I meet him. Because, you know, things are changed
around so quickly in conversation. So she told
the attorney that I'd want to see Balenciaga in
person and that I'd be back in Paris within six
weeks. But, we started getting phone calls, one
after another, so we decided to go back sooner.
We went back to Paris and we stayed there quite
a while. I never used or very seldom used origi­
nal styles she bought for herself; they were
too extreme for the market. As you know, she....

Q. Yeah, she was a very chic woman, very chic.

A. Yeah. She could wear a towel and it would look
beautiful. Most of her clothes now are at the
Metropolitan Museum of Art. We went up for her
 fittings at Balenciaga and then several days later
there was a message from Balenciaga; she thought
it was about her fittings so she called up her
vendeuse. The vendeuse said she had not called
but would find out who had. And sure enough
it was Balenciaga that wanted to see me. So, of
course, I don't have to tell you how quickly I
went back there to the hotel to get myself ready
to meet Mr. Balenciaga at five o'clock. We went
to his place, and my wife and I stayed there from
- 51 -
until nine o'clock that night talking. She would interpret everything for me. In front of me, he spoke very little English because he didn't want to, not that my English is any good but you know how the French people are....

Q. Oh, indeed.

A. ...Usually, they won't talk to you in English even though they speak well. And then he invited us to his apartment. I said, my God, tell him that I don't want to take up his time; we can do the rest of it tomorrow or the next day. So she told him and he said not to worry because Spanish people, even if they have an appointment for nine o'clock get there at ten or eleven o'clock. So we went to his apartment; had some more drinks, and a wonderful evening. I thought I had the man tied up. He was a very great man, a fascinating man and a great designer. In those days, he was number one. I told him that to work in America, he'd have to appear at least twice a year to put the collection over properly. He'd also have to make some changes; I couldn't take the same collection back, all of it, because ninety percent of the designers already had the collection. He would have to make some changes to give
me something special, and he'd have to appear. That would be the whole gimmick which would work very well. So, after several days, he told me he couldn't come to the States. He'd been here before, but he had a feeling that the buildings were going to fall down on him, so he'd never come back again. He said, he couldn't come back to the States; it would be impossible. So my wife is the that told him not to make that deal with me. She advised him not to do it because of his fear of coming here. I would be a failure without him. You know, it would be the same....

Q. Yes.

A. ...It would be the same clothes, see, there'd be no change. But the most important thing I want to tell you is that without our telling anybody of our call from Balenciaga, when we left Balenciaga, the lobby at the Hotel Lancaster was filled with reporters and photographers wanting to find out what happened that night, you know, get all the information....

Q. Yes.

A. That's how popular that man was. And then several days later he invited us to his country home in the
town where Joan of Arc was born, Ora? Orly? Something like that.

Q. Oh, Orleans, Orleans.

A. Orleans, that's right.

Q. ORLEANS, yes.

A. She was born there and that's where he had his big farm, his big beautiful farm. He was just wonderful to me and to my wife especially, and we stayed there three days. We had a wonderful time but there was no way of making the connection together. He wanted it very badly, but I don't know if you had the experience I've had with designers: see, when a designer makes a collection, it's very hard to make a second collection that is different. It can't be done. You can sell a collection, a direct collection; for example, if I represent Yves St. Laurent, Rive Gauche, you could take that collection and sell it. In those years where every designer that you could think of was in that couture showroom all ready to take parts and copy the exact garments and bring them back here. The competition would be too great for me. But, meanwhile I loved meeting him; I had a great experience. Other people start calling me up in Europe.

- 54 -
Q. The point is that you were, at that point clearly going to go back into business.

A. Right. Now I was planning to go back into business; that's why I went around, I'll tell you a very interesting thing; Pierre Cardin started becoming very popular.

Q. Uh, huh.

A. And I spoke to my wife about it, Mrs. Shaw, and she said, well, I think these clothes are very nice. They have a newness because they have mostly like an A shape. I don't know if you remember that?

Q. Was that similar to the trapeze that St. Laurent did?

A. Yes. It wasn't a trapeze exactly; you see, to give you an idea, a friend of mine bought about eight of them. She's a very rich woman (don't forget eight of them at one time is a lot of money). . . .

Q. A lot of money.

A. . . . Her husband was a Premier of Iran at the time. His name was Dr. Imani. I don't have to tell you the amount of wealth he had; I thought without telling Pierre Cardin, I'd take some of the dresses and try to make the patterns in America and see how they fit before talking to him again. I'd had
several conversations with him. I just couldn't make the dress. Even though I had the best pattern-makers working for me at the time, they just couldn't make the dress because the American patternmakers, even though they came from Europe, had a different system. All they knew was to make five and a half inch shoulder, fourteen and a half inch front waist, sixteen and a half back waist. In later years, with these new designers, they didn't use measurements like that; they got the look first and then the measurements. See, the look is what counted to get the shape of what they wanted which was a different thing. Measurements came later, you know, after they'd make the garment....

Q. Right.

A. ...They'd give you enough arm, armpit, arm, armhole, shoulders, whatever they thought would be best for the look. So my man just couldn't make Cardin's dress so I hired another man and he couldn't make them, so I didn't bother with Cardin. But I want to give you an idea how right I was. There were people that worked for me as patternmakers (one was Danny who later went to Anne Klein as a production man, and Irene who was a very good woman in the
sampleroom, a very good patternmaker too and left
to work at a firm set up as Pierre Cardin. I told
Danny, even though you're leaving me, I'm going to
put you wise to something, don't try to make patterns
in America because you won't get the look. I said,
I've experienced all that and it's impossible. This
is a very good thing to know about the dress busi­
ness. I said, you have to be under his supervision
in Europe unless he wants to live in this country,
which he won't do, to get the right look and the
right pattern. And that's what they did after the
first collection. Even, even though you have the
style in front of you, you can't get it copied that
way. So after that they made two trips a year to
Europe.

Q. I'm sorry. Which collection are we talking about
now? For Pierre Cardin or...?

A. I'm talking Pierre Cardin.

Q. Right.

A. That was to give you an idea how different the pat­
terns are. That's how they continued doing it as
long as they were in the couture business. I came
back to the States, my accountants names were Nadel
and Sharp on Madison Avenue. Nadel wanted me to go
with Pomerantz, Freddie Pomerantz; he thought he
would be a good thing for me. Sharp wanted me to
go with Jane Derby.

Q. Uh, huh.

A. I said that I had already fixed a place up on
Seventh Avenue, in 530 Seventh Avenue and was going
in for myself. He said, no Ben, I know you'll al­
ways be away, you'll always be travelling; please
do what I'm telling you. I just couldn't make up
my mind. Of course, I went to the wrong place, I
went with Jane Derby where I did very well, but
with Freddie Pomerantz, I would have done much
better; he became a very big deal. That was very
interesting. I think I went up to Freddie's place
with Mr. Nadel. In those days, Freddie Pomerantz
wasn't as big as he is today. I think he had a
nice business, but I don't think there was very
much money there. He was a wonderful man and it
was a question of tossing a coin. I went with
Jane Derby three months later. I became very
successful.

End Tape 1, Side 2
Q. Before nineteen thirty when your business was still the one that preceded Elfreda, there was another story involved about why you closed it up. So would you talk about that a little bit?

A. Oh, that's when the unions started to organize and they hired gangsters to help them organize the union; that's where the Mafia came into the picture and....

Q. That was as late as nineteen thirty....

A. Thirty one.

Q. Yes. Before that you had had no....

A. We had no union problems at all. I don't think we were organi... There was no such thing as an organization with the union. They were trying to get you to organize but we didn't get together. And it was Dubinsky's idea of getting gangsters and the Mafia to side with them and to help him organize the manufacturers. So, they'd come around; the very big gangsters of the Mafia would come around and try to organize you and see if they could get paid off. They would tell you they'd be on your side and you wouldn't have to organize, and then they'd go back to the union and tell them that they're organizing you. So....

Q. Did that include Louie Lepke and Gurrah? Were those the people?
A. Louie Lepke and Gurrah, they got the electric chair.

Q. I mean, were those the people that you're talking about?

A. Yes. They came right up to my place, they were putting their feet on the desk and they ran the business. But there was another fellow by the name of Elkins and....

Q. Elkins?

A. Yeah. He was a big gorilla that used to come around. The crowd that would come in with the guns everyday into the showroom and try to take it over, were the little mobsters that belonged to the leaders of the gang. They were associated with the gang but they were really like, like what we call crooks, dope fiends and what not. But they'd come up with guns and with all the guns they'd go through your showroom and try to shake you down. So, there was a very large manufacturer by the name of Jack Silverman, I don't think he ever.... Did Pomerantz mention that name to you?

Q. I don't think so.

A. He was very large and he was in 498 Seventh Avenue and he came down to see me to tell me that if I paid off these gangsters, they won't bother me. And we
did that. We gave them about, anywhere's between ten and fifteen thousand dollars. But it wasn't to their satisfaction and they had these little gangsters come around and when they found out that I had the upper hand and was beginning to arrange to have them out of my way, they threw a stink bomb in my place. Now, you know, when a stink bomb is thrown, the bulb explodes and breaks and the little atoms fly all over the place and they embed themselves in the fabrics, in the dresses. In those days we would carry at least between five or six thousand dresses at a time on the floor with all the piece goods around in the back. And these bombs were embedded in all the fabrics and all the dresses. Then a cleaner would come up two hours later; he would tell you he would clean them. He was already prepared. They would clean the place out, which we had to pay for, and of course, we opened all the windows, we tried to get the air in, or had the dresses cleaned. We started shipping some of them and we started getting reports from the customers (in those days you only could ship by train, by freight) that the styles were good, but when they opened up the packages, the dresses had a terrible smell. They'd think that it
was a skunk on the same car of the train, so they....

We got returns, so many returns that we decided to get rid of the balance of the dresses—we couldn't sell them, we had to give them away. For garbage, you know, throw them out, get rid of them. And we had to get rid of the place, we had to clean out the piece goods; we couldn't use the piece goods or the dresses. Dewey was the District Attorney at the time. He had an assistant by the name of Gelb. They came around to investigate how much money we paid the gangsters and, of course, we had to show our books and they found out the amount of money we paid out which, I think was between ten and fifteen thousand dollars. They had us come down to their office, Dewey wasn't there that day but Gelb was there and that's.... (See, during the Depression, the name of my firm was Weinman, Wilkes and Schwartz, but during the crash Wilkes lost so much money, he sold out; Gardner was one of my salesmen whose father-in-law was Mr. McGill, a very large silk manufacturer. He or the mother-in-law gave him the money to become my partner. That's what happened, I left that out. The firm became Weinman, Gardner and Schwartz.) And we
went down to City Hall, to his office, and my partner said, you can't keep me down here. They took a book out with all the photos of the gangsters and the gorillas and the mafia, for us to point our finger at, the ones that we gave the money to. So Mr. Gardner said, this is really funny—we don't have to tell you anything, we don't have to point our fingers at anyone. The laws were different in those days. Right in back of the District Attorney's office there was a little jail and they threw him right in jail. He was in jail for a few hours until I convinced Mr. Gelb that I would point out the gangsters and the people that took the money. That's what really happened. That's when I lost all my money.

Q. And that's when you closed up that business?
A. There was nothing left because I couldn't ship anything back.

Q. So you closed the business and then after that you opened Elfreda?
A. Then I quit for a while and came back, and that's when I opened Elfreda.

Q. Uh, huh. With Mrs. Hill as your designer?
A. No, not at the beginning; it was Elfreda who was the designer. That's how I got the name.
Q. I see.

A. And it was very successful right from the very beginning. And Elfreda was with the firm for at least three or four years and then she decided to go back to her hometown. She wasn't a very young woman when she came into designing; she was about fifty; she stayed about five years and then she decided to go back to her hometown and retire.

Q. And is that when you had Mrs. Hill come in?

A. Yes, then Mrs. Hill came, that's right.

Q. Uh, huh. And you started to say something about Harry Shacter?

A. Oh, I meant to tell you, Harry Shacter was one of my very good designers. He was a very successful and very smart man but when Ben Zuckerman went into business he went to work for him.

Q. I see. And you had other designers?

A. Then I hired Miss Hill after that.

Q. Uh, huh. But when you finally closed Elfreda and took the time to go around the world, tried to get Balenciaga and then Pierre Cardin, that was really the point at which you started the second part of a career?

A. Correct.

- 64 -
Q. Right? Okay. Let's talk about that.
A. I had two accountants named Nadel and Scharf; one
told me to go with Jane Derby....
Q. Right.
A. ...And the other one told me to go with Pomerantz.
Q. Yes.
A. Nadel wanted me to be associated with Pomerantz.
Scharf wanted me to go to see Jane Derby. It was
a toss up for me because at that time both of them
were in a very good situation. I think Derby was
much worse off. So I decided to associate with
Jane Derby. It's an interesting story because Jane
Derby was a great woman but she never made any
clothes. I found that out later. The clothes
were designed by a very clever young man (he
later committed suicide.) When I went up to see
Jane Derby, I saw a beautiful collection of clothes
and Jane Derby told me that she was the one that
made the clothes. After I went into business with
her, I found out that she had several designers
that she worked with....
Q. So she really worked as a stylist?
A. As a stylist.
Q. This business in a way set the pattern for what
happened later on.

A. Right.

Q. So, I am interested to know, did you buy into her business? I mean, did you buy...?

A. Oh, yes. I bought into her business for fifty percent.

Q. Fifty percent ownership of the business.

A. But she didn't have any money when I first got there. I found out everything was mortgaged. I went into that business in those days with my investment supposed to be fifty thousand, but I finally invested close to two hundred thousand dollars.

Q. Two hundred thousand?

A. Yes. Because she lied, she didn't have any money.

Q. When did Oscar de la Renta come into that picture?

A. Oh, that's what I want to tell you. Oscar came in later on. Before that, we made enough money for her to live in Bermuda part of the time and then for the greater part of the time. She was then at least seventy years old.

Q. Yes. Excuse me. I had mentioned Andrew Woods the other day....

A. That's the one.

Q. Okay. It was Andrew Woods who was with her as a
A. I was open for a designer--somebody recommended Oscar de la Renta who was very young at the time. I went up to see him at Elizabeth Arden's. We met several times. I arranged for him to come in business with me. At the beginning he was employed by me, and I gave him a percentage of the business and later a partnership. He turned out to be very, very good, very successful, very bright and very much with it all the time.

Q. In about how many years did it become Oscar de la Renta instead of Jane Derby? Do you know?

A. Well, at least say, let's say about a year later or maybe a little more because you can't promote a name immediately. As soon as he got to be known in the business, I started promoting his name. People liked him. What happens is that buyers really want to know who the designer is. They get into conversation with the designers. They get to like them or not. But most of the time, most people really loved him. He happens to be a great man and a very successful man. I owned the business, but I gave Oscar a partnership and then I gave my son a partnership and there was a
man by the name of Joe Arnone to whom I gave an interest in the business because....

Q. Was he the production man?
A. Yes. I wanted enough time to fool around because I was opening up other businesses, you see.

Q. Right.
A. Because while I was associated with Jane Derby, I went into Geoffrey Beene first, no Sarmi first.

Q. Right.
A. Then Geoffrey Beene, then Donald Brooks and then, from there on, I started going into other businesses with other designers.

Q. You..., now you were setting a new pattern....
A. Right.

Q. ...I mean, a new way of doing business in the market?
A. Correct.

Q. What was your idea?
A. I felt that as I knew so many people and as I was so successful, the more businesses I opened up with good designers, the greater a merchant I'd be. But I had a tough time organizing them under one roof--didn't work--that's what I planned to do but it didn't work out.

Q. You were going to have everybody together?
A. Yes. I thought I'd make it a big business that way and organize it that way, but it didn't work that way.

Q. So what....

A. It didn't work that way for me.

Q. Uh, huh. Right.

A. Because I had all independent designers, see, that's the answer.

Q. And so you put each one into a separate facility?

A. Absolutely separate.

Q. First, you worked with Norell or did...?

A. Yes. Well, I worked with Norell while I was associated with Geoffrey. Norell was for sale. Norell's business was divided into three parts. Norell had a third and his partner, Mr. Simms, had a third and the owner of Nan Duskin had a third.

When Nan Duskin's owner died, the estate owned a third of Norell. We thought it would be a good idea if we had a chance to buy into the business. I think that's the only friend that Geoffrey Beene would allow me to be associated with. I went in there with a plan of buying it.

Q. Plan on buying a third of it?

A. No, a half because if I bought that man out, I would
have to buy out the other as well.

Q. Uh, huh. So when you went into business with Geoffrey Beene, he had the right to say yes or no to anybody else you were going to work with?

A. Oh, no. My contracts called for me to have the right to make other arrangements to go into any other outside business.

Q. Uh, huh. But you said Geoffrey could say no?

A. Only for cause. I would have to ask his consent. In Norell's case he gave me consent because he liked Norell very much.

Q. So he had the right to say yes or no?

A. In a way.

Q. What about with Donald Brooks when he got...?

A. Geoffrey had a partnership with me in Donald Brooks.

Q. Oh, he did?

A. Yes. There we were partners together. Orlandi and Geoffrey Beene. That's the only firm I had that wasn't successful at all. I needed another designer to bring out the clothes. If you know Donald Brooks, you know that he was not always around or he'd come in when he felt like it, so we had a lot of problems. When you're in business you can't change the designer's name every minute so you'd continue with a designer that is a
label of the firm and you hire other men to make the clothes that are salable.

Q. When you first started with Geoffrey Beene, who had had a lot of experience in the market, you had a man producing the clothes....

A. By the name of Orlandi. He was a....

Q. What about Mr. Immerman?

A. Oh, he was a partner of Geoffrey Beene's, and they didn't get along together because Immerman made a different kind of a look which wasn't Geoffrey Beene's look. That's what made Geoffrey Beene so big: he brought in that new feeling of eliminating the seams as much as possible, especially in the blouse. You remember the...?

Q. Yes.

A. When Geoffrey didn't get along with Immerman, that's the time Immerman decided to sell out Leo Orlandi, who was a production man there with Geoffrey and knew Geoffrey Beene very well because he worked with Geoffrey Beene at Teal Traina. He went to see Geoffrey, and he arranged a meeting for me to meet Geoffrey. That's how we got together.

Q. Geoffrey Beene had already gone into business with Orlandi?
A. No, no. With Immerman.

Q. I mean, with Immerman, and then you came into the picture.

A. Through Leo Orlandi.

Q. And you bought into the business?

A. Right.

Q. And set it up again from an administrative and production point of view?

A. Correct, right.

Q. Okay.

A. Leo Orlandi took care of the production and I was general merchant....

Q. Right.

A. Merchandising man.

Q. How much time were you able to spend with a firm like that?

A. Oh, at that time I only had Jane Derby, Sarmi, and then Geoffrey Beene. So I really used to spend quite a bit of time, like four or five hours a day.

Q. About what year was this? With Geoffrey Beene?

A. That's what I was thinking while I was talking to you.

Q. Yes. I believe it was somewhere in the early sixties. My recollection of the timing is that Geoffrey Beene was on his own by nineteen sixty three or sixty four.
A. Yes. After he left Teal Traina. It must have been around 1964.

Q. And Donald Brooks had opened up about sixty four also.

A. No. What happened with Donald Brooks was that I really met him through Gerry Stutz (President of Bendel's) and Maxy Jarman (President of Genesco). We had cocktails one afternoon (Maxy Jarman, Gerry Stutz, Donald and myself). Maxy wanted to invest three hundred thousand dollars if I'd go into business with Donald Brooks. I thought maybe Maxy Jarman was a little crazy to invest that kind of money, but I really didn't know Donald Brooks. I got to know him after we went into business together. He had been very late making a collection for Gerry Stutz for the store for a show. So they called me to put the collection together. I was the one that got the dressmakers on the outside because it was too late to make it on the premises. We only had a couple of machines on the premises, but we had to get a line out of fifty or sixty pieces. So I was the one that they called and that's how I met Donald Brooks. I helped to get the collection together so it was shown on time. That's how I met Maxy Jarman.

Q. Now, did he then let you buy him out?

A. Who?
Q. Maxy Jarman. Did he sell his interest to you?
A. No, he... Maxy Jarman didn't put any money, you know....

Q. I thought you said he had three hundred thousand dollars?
A. He offered me three hundred thousand.

Q. I see.
A. But I wouldn't let him put it in.

Q. I see.
A. Because I didn't want him to lose it.

Q. Well, but did, you must have put some money in yourself?
A. Oh, sure we did. We put in about seventy-five thousand and more. In those days, you worked with a bank and the bank knew you very well. I had no trouble working with the banks.

Q. So you worked with the bank loans?
A. But the investment was about three, three fifty. ($350,000.) You know, by the time you get ready, get your merchandise, get your piece goods and all that, you spent that much.

Q. How long did you stay in that relationship with Donald Brooks?
A. I really don't know. I sold out to Geoffrey Beene and
Leo Orlandi. I stayed with Donald after that, maybe a year and a half. He was a failure with me. I tried very hard but you can't accomplish anything by designers being absent all the time.

Q. Now, when was it that you were involved with Ann Sadowsky?

A. Oh, that must have been in the early forties.

Q. Oh, so this was before you became involved with...?

A. Yes. While I was at Elfreda, Miss Kay who worked for me was a very good friend of Ann Sadowsky's. She kept bothering me to please come down and help Ann Sadowsky. So we put some money into her business and we became very successful. The minute we became successful, she found different ways to buy me out. So I said, instead of fighting, just pay me out, get the money ready and that's how I sold out. Later, she went bankrupt.

Q. So that actually the first....

A. Ann Sadowsky came before Geoffrey Beene.

Q. Yes, right. So that you really had already in the back of your head, something of an idea of working with outside designers?

A. Yeah, that's right.

Q. Well, now, after Donald Brooks?
A. Then I took on Halston.

Q. Now, Halston went into business himself in 1968?

A. On sixty eighth street.

Q. Yes, but it was 1968.

A. Well this is what happened. I received a call from Halston. Those were the days I got to be known so everybody was calling to see if I could help advise them about business. I told Halston that he was a great designer of millinery. I was sure he had a good clientele, and great talent. The way that he could become successful was to go into business for himself for a couple of years. Knowing the clientele he had it would take him less time to become very famous, less time than the average designer because he had a great client following from Bergdorf Goodman. It was about two years later, exactly the way I arranged it that we got together again. That's when I opened up Halston ready-to-wear.

Q. So that was about 1970?

A. Yeah, about two, two and a half years later.

Q. Right, right. You maintained a relationship with Halston until Norton Simon bought him out?

A. Yes that's right.

Q. Is that right?
A. Before that, I sold Oscar de la Renta's business
to a firm called....

Q. Richton.

A. ...Richton International. And that's when I sold out.
They each had a partnership and they stayed.

Q. You mean, Gerry and Oscar?

A. Gerry, Oscar and Joe Arnone. Of course Oscar got more
shares because of his being a bigger stockholder in
the corporation. That's what happened.

Q. And so, at that point, you had no longer a financial
interest in Oscar de la Renta?

A. No, no. Well, what they really do when the outside
firms buy, you're still on the payroll as consultant
after the sale, about three years or four years.

Q. And then, when Halston was sold to Norton Simon?

A. I was on the payroll for three years.

Q. Right, okay. And all through this period in the
seventies, you became involved again and again with
people like Jerry Guttenberg, for example?

A. No, Jerry Guttenberg was only a salesman who worked
on a commission which was a percentage of the gross
sales.

Q. Well, that was when he became, when he was with....

A. He was never a partner.
Q. You're talking about the Albert Capraro business?
A. That came later. While I had Halston, I also had a business with another designer which was very successful. The designer once worked for Teal Traina, before that he was a dancer. His name was Dominic Rompollo.

Q. Dominic Rompollo.
A. He was very nice and very good. As soon as I opened something up that became successful, I always looked for something else.

Q. It's a very interesting way of operating. In other words, when you would buy into a business and put it....
A. Together.
Q. Together?
A. Once I put it together, and got the clientele and get everything going, then it... always gave me a new idea, a new thought.

Q. And now, would you sell out whatever interest you had and take off?
A. Yes.
Q. And go off into something else?
A. Right.
Q. So that you were....
A. That's what I did.
Q. Yes, exactly. So that your modus operandi was that
you put the business together, make sure it was really
moving and then went onto something else because you
had many people calling you for help.

A. Correct.

Q. Now who were some of the other designers?

A. I had a great feeling about putting young people into
business, you see. That fellow Dominic was very good,
and then later I had James Doherty and at the same
time I had Rizkallah.

Q. Rizkallah?

A. He's very successful. Then I went in with, with...
Albert Capraro and Jerry Guttenberg. Albert Capraro
I knew very well because he worked as an assistant for
Oscar de la Renta. When Jerry Guttenberg wanted to go
into business, he came to see me. Albert didn't have
any money. So, you know how you work it out with a
designer, you give a certain amount of stock in the
corporation and when he makes the money, he buys in
his shares. That's how it's done.

Q. So what did you do, back then with seventy five thou-
sand or something like that?

A. Yes. In Albert's case, I forget how much money. I
had to sign guarantees up to seven hundred and fifty
thousand dollars, that was a big business. But, I
was robbed....

Q. You signed guarantees with the bank?
A. ...I was robbed of close to two million dollars.

So when I find out about the amount of pilferage and thievery and things that were going on, I sold out to Jerry and Tony Ciano, who was another partner there. When I hear that name, I go out of my mind. See, that's the first big thing that happened to me in my life that destroyed me actually because of the amount of robbery. Now, what happened, when I found out the things that are going on in that business.... A man came to see me who spoke of Beneficial Finance which had a piece of the business of Estevez and Eva Gabor....

Q. Luis Estevez?
A. ...making dresses and wigs. Do you remember? She made the wigs, he made clothes. When Luis Estevez left the business and went back to California, the head of the firm wanted a good designer name to be associated with Gabor. And he told me that the business was owned by Beneficial Finance. So I needed a statement. He wanted a certified financial statement. I called my accountants and told them I had a good sale for the business. They would have to
work on the books because I told the potential buyers about our figures.... See, I gave them the figures that my accountant gave me. Now, the head accountants of the firm send men out in the field to work and men could be paid off very easily.

Q. Uh, huh.

A. A certified statement. That's what you need to sell a business. I couldn't get the certified statement together. I used to get reports every month but there was nothing to back it up. It was all gone. For example, they'd say a thousand dresses in this factory or that factory... All I got was paper. You know, when you get big, you have to depend upon your accountants and figures. The shortage was about two million dollars easily. But, I'm giving you figures which I found out later. So I sold out to the boys, and I got a thirty three thousand dollar check. I sold it very cheap, but there were two hundred thousand dollars to follow. Well, thirty days later, I went to the bank to get my guarantee back, which was very fortunate because thirty days later or sixty days later they went into bankruptcy. That's when Jerry Guttenberg made that big failure.

Q. And that was the only time you ever had that kind of
failure?
A. I'm still trying to collect part of the money. I'm having my lawyer fight it. I don't know if he'll ever get it. That was my biggest downfall, the first big failure in business.

Q. What year was this?
A. About four years ago.

Q. About four years ago. So it was 1977 or there abouts?
A. That's how that thing broke up.

Q. Well now, did people like Giorgio St. Angelo....
A. Oh, he came later.

Q. That came later?
A. He came later. See, the people in the market were after me, mostly the press, to please do something with Giorgio. At the beginning, his clothes were very extreme and very stagey looking. You can't do that on Seventh Avenue unless you want limited sales. And then I finally associated myself with Giorgio and got to know his clothes very well. We'd get together.... Giorgio was the type of designer that was very nice and would listen to you all the time. We were able to have conferences and meetings, and he'd try to stick to the things that I would talk about. I would only talk about styles for a volume business, and

- 82 -
that's what it turned out to be later on. That's when I had Stephen Burrows.

Q. You had Stephen Burrows before Pat Tennant?

A. I gave it to Pat Tennant.

Q. In other words, you had a showroom for Stephen in 550 Seventh Avenue.

A. A separate business, a very big business.

Q. Yes, right.

A. We did a big job with Stephen. He's a good designer... very individual at that time.

Q. Uh, huh. When you say a big business.... Did he do more than a million or two million dollars?

A. Oh yeah, we did three million.

Q. Three million?

A. But, you see, in this business you have to depend on two things: quantities large enough to make money to overcome your overhead and good styling and good fit so you don't get returns. Those are the two things you have to worry about and... But he's a good designer, he was very young and limited at the time when we went together, but very smart. You know when we did the show in Paris? They had five designers, American designers?

Q. Yes.
A. I think it was Bill Blass and....

Q. Halston.

A. Halston. Was Geoffrey Beene in that? I think so.

Q. Yes, I believe so.

A. There was somebody else.

Q. Stephen Burrows was four....

A. The only one that really got an order in Paris was Stephen Burrows, for thirty thousand dollars. But the merchandise was really great. Oh, Oscar de la Renta too. Am I right?

Q. Yes.

A. And all the clothes are beautiful. Oscar is very great on dressy clothes, exceptionally good, but Stephen....

Q. But Stephen got an order?

A. Yes.

Q. Right.

A. See, he was very colorful.

Q. And of course his price range was far below the others....

A. Oh yes.

Q. ...So that it was perhaps more possible to sell.

A. See Stephen's... But you see what happens most of the time is designers gain a great deal of experience
that's when they become twice as great. You see,
I'm a pretty good stylist, always had that knowledge.
It's the only thing I have today even at my age.

Q. Well, that's one of the things you have, yes.

A. I can style, I can style a dress well. To give you
an idea what I do... You can't be successful if you
buy goods later; you have to cut merchandise when
you have your preview with the designer and your
collection is ready to show.

End Tape 2, Side 1
Q. Are you saying that....
A. You see, it's a question of who the designer was.
   If he was a good designer, and I felt he had sufficient experience and his styles were good, then I
   would cut thousands of a number. You know it's a lot of merchandise to cut at those prices.
Q. Even at this time? In the seventies?
A. Yes. Because if you don't, with the overhead you have (you know these designers are quite expensive
   and the samples cost a fortune) you have to be ready to have enough merchandise to sell to over­
   come the expense and make profits. Geoffrey Beene's styles I'd cut heavy and Oscar's I'd cut heavy. It
   depends on who the designer was. Take for example, Giorgio's case. He made mostly beaded dresses the
   first time he was associated with me. Just the bead­ing alone would cost anywhere from fifty to a hundred
   and fifty or two hundred dollars. You know, I used to cut five or six hundred of a number before I'd
   sell a dress, not the first season but the second. You see, after I got to know him, to know his look
   and to know his feeling, I knew exactly which way to cut. You have to do it, or it would take you
   fifty weeks to get a dress cut.
Q. Right. Just so that we put it on record: who were the others of the designers you've worked with that we haven't really talked about yet? For example, in the seventies, you also did work with Adri?

A. Yes, that was another one who I thought was very good but she was too early for me. You know, sometimes I would change a designer and give them up: she was too extreme. But what happens, when designers would work for me, they'd gain so much experience that they were able to use it for themselves in their future business life.

Q. Right.

A. I would teach them a great deal.

Q. Now, is there anybody we've left out? There are an awful lot of people who owe you a lot. You helped set up Gloria Vanderbilt?

A. Oh yes, that came later.

Q. Right. It came rather recently as I remember.

A. And very, very successful, right from the beginning. You know, Barry Somerfield was one of my partners in that business. And Barry was really the one that found Mr. Hirsch.

Q. Warren Hirsch?

A. Warren Hirsch and he made the deal for the firm with
Gloria Vanderbilt.

Q. Uh, huh. For Murjani?
A. Murjani, yes.
Q. Yes.
A. He was an Indian. And you know when we made the deal, they only did seven and a half million dollars. That's all they did and then when she went there, I permitted them to put in skirts, and then blouses and then jeans.

Q. In other words, originally when that business was set up, you had a part of the business, you owned part of it. Then when it, when they went into a licensing arrangement...?
A. I still had that part.
Q. You still had the part...?
A. See, in all my businesses, all of them, the business owned the license of anything we would do on the outside.
Q. The designers did not individually own their licenses?
A. See, if you don't own the licenses, you're in trouble because the cost of making collections is so great. That's what I used to gamble on, that was my most important point in arranging the contracts.
Q. In other words, whatever the business was, once they
began to license, the business still owned the license?

A. We owned the license and we shared it when we'd go into the business.

Q. Right. Okay. Let's go back and talk a little bit more about some of the things we were discussing the other day when you talked about buyers and how you dealt with merchants.

A. Well, in all the years that I've been in business, especially when Elfreda became so well known, I was always busy with new ideas and new types of dresses. What else makes a manufacturer? You have to keep working that way. I got to know most of the people, big buyers and merchandise men and presidents of stores when I went on the road. When I opened up other businesses, sometimes I used to get crazy ideas to sell a certain limited amount of people, but it didn't work.

Q. Because you could not make things exclusive, too many people wanted to....

A. Well, you know what happened? When I first opened up Halston, I decided to sell one store, and one specialty shop.

Q. One department store, and one specialty shop in a city?

A. Yes, it was very successful but it put me in a very bad situation because I had so many friends who were
buyers and merchandise men and presidents of stores. They told me that I did a very bad thing. They demanded that I sell the merchandise to them--other stores--which I had to do eventually.

Q. Uh, huh.

A. It's a successful thing to do if you can do it.

Q. You had mentioned, the other day, something about your relationship with the union, that is, that we had not discussed. Now, in more recent years after the episodes back in the thirties, what were your relationships with the unions?

A. Well, in the beginning, I didn't want to be unionized because I didn't feel it was important enough.

Q. In... When you say the beginning, what was the begin­ning?

A. When they first started in thirty, thirty one... I forgot what year it was.

Q. Uh, huh. But what about the forties and the fifties and the sixties?

A. Oh, then I was associated with the union. All through those years, I was associated with the union because the unions became a power. If you'd want to work an open shop on the Q.T., eventually they'd catch up with you.
Q. Did you always have outside shops? Did you have any inside shops?
A. The only inside shops I had was with Sarmi.
Q. Right.
A. In the other ones, I would always have four to six machines for alterations to make duplicates or things like that. I'd always had help, samplehands working on the premises....
Q. But....
A. But not the manufacturing.
Q. But....
A. But I did have samplehands to whom when the sample rooms were quiet, instead of laying them off, I would give some work like certain specials to make or little lots to make, to hold on to the samplehands. That I did. Knowing people, it was very easy for me. Even to this day, I think I know more people than I wish I knew. I kept this card for you because I wanted to show it to you.
I think this was after I met you the last time. We went out for dinner and, at La Grenouille, I was sitting in the front and my back was to the crowd.
Q. Right.
A. To give you an idea how people know me, and this
goes on all the time, the waiter brought me this card.

Q. Oh, thank you. The card says, "it has been so long since Donald Brooks. It's signed Jane Foster, Neiman Marcus....

A. She was a buyer at Neiman Marcus. She recognized me but truthfully, I didn't recognize her until I got very close to her and she started talking to me....

Q. Well, there's only one Ben Shaw and there have been lots of buyers.

A. Well this is, what I tried to tell you the other day. This is what happens with the amount of people I know. I feel so embarrassed. I knew so many people that sometimes... I can remember telephone numbers very well and lately, I started forgetting names. I can't remember so many names. It's impossible.

Q. Right.

A. Of course Adam Gimbel was easy and people like that.

Q. Yes, Stanley Marcus was pretty easy too....

A. ...Was easy too because....

Q. Andy Goodman was easy too. Yes. Ben, if I think we've pretty much talked about the business up till the present; could we go back. I mean all the way back, and talk a little bit about what was happening
with your family life when you got started in all of this? I don't mean your mother, about whom you've talked a great deal, but what happened when you first got married. You have two sons...?

A. No, I had two sons and a daughter and then my first wife became very sick with encephalitis. I don't know if you know what that is?

Q. Yes I do.

A. I know they might have cures for it today but I went to some of the most prominent doctors in the country who said it's a disease they had no cure for.

Q. How old were your children at that time?

A. Very young. Oh, I don't think they were more than about....

Q. Let's see, it was Jerry and...?

A. Jerry was the youngest. I don't think Jerry was more than about four years, Bob was about five and a half and my daughter was about seven.

Q. Uh, huh.

A. And this went on for a long time.

Q. So this was probably, almost fifty years ago? I would think.

A. More.

Q. Did the children go away to school and...?
A. No, first I moved into town. I lived in Long Beach at the time. Then I moved into town on Seventy Seventh Street and Central Park West across the street from the....

Q. Museum.

A. Museum of Natural History.

Q. Right.

A. And, I thought it would be a good idea because it would be near a school, and then I sent them to a Hebrew School there too, on Eighty Sixth Street. Of course, I had nurses for the kids and a maid for the house. And then I had to keep special nurses for my wife. This went on for quite a while, so I got divorced. A couple of years later I met my other wife, Miriam Shaw.

Q. Miriam. Right.

A. ...And then I got married in forty-two.

Q. Uh, huh. Right. And she really travelled with you and....

A. Oh, yeah.

Q. ...Was part of the business in a certain kind of way. I mean not technically but...?

A. That's right.

Q. Yes.
A. She just travelled because she had good style sense and was very knowledgeable. She helped me a great deal in conversing about the designers and couturiers. We were exchanging ideas most of the time like what she thought would be the outstanding clothes. I learned more and more each time.

Q. Uh, huh. So that a good part of your social life had to do with your business life?

A. Right. I'd say sixty percent of my social life, more, maybe seventy. I think I could say eighty.

Q. And that included when you were here and when you were travelling?

A. Oh, sure, we always had dinners and... I think we used to entertain about three or four days a week or we'd be entertained in one way or another.

Q. When you were talking about the way in which you learned about businesses, you said something very interesting: that starting from when you were a young man, you would go into a business and you would learn as you were working.

A. You know, that's exactly what happens, even today. Some of these great designers really get their experience from working first for others and learning at the manufacturers' expense.
See, the only one that I know of that didn't have that experience was Oscar: he came right out to design immediately. Geoffrey Beene had about six or seven jobs prior to going into his own business. People didn't understand his beautiful clothes, didn't understand how to manufacture them. Teal Traina was the first one to be successful with him in a big way. Now, Halston only had that one experience with the retail shop. Who else? I'm talking about the designers I had.

Q. Right.

A. All the others had experience with jobs before I met them. They held jobs; were fired or kept or left on their own. Either the manufacturer didn't know what to do with them or the designer's clothes weren't suitable for that man to manufacture. That's a big thing in business: you have to understand clothes.

Q. And you have to understand a particular person's clothes.

A. Right.

Q. So the elements that you consider really important are the design?

A. That's number one.
Q. And what's second?
A. The rest is the patternmaking which is very, very important: the fit of the garment and the manufacturing; as to salesmen, you get all you want. Maybe today it costs a little bit more money.

Q. And what about the pricing of the garments?
A. That was up to me.

Q. That was up to you.
A. Up to me... It's question of which firm I was with.

If the production man was my partner, like in Geoffrey's case, we had Leo Orlandi so he would do the pricing but I would interact with him with the pricing.

Q. When you went into a new business, did you decide approximately where you thought the designer's clothes should go? I mean, what kind of a department?
A. No. When I had the confidence in a designer, I knew I was going to sell the clothes. And, I had no problem there because I knew.... In the days of Elfreda we sold every good store in America. I got to know most of the people, even though in those days, I was really into production and only later into selling.

Q. But you got to know them all as somebody who was in production?
A. Yes. Right.
Q. Why do you suppose that was? I....

A. Well, you know, in, in those days, when there's a shortage of merchandise, people would go to the shipping clerk so they'd get their shipments quicker or the production man. Especially during the days of the World War II, every shipping clerk became a big salesman, you know.

Q. Because he was the one who determined who got the shipments, right?

A. That's right. Even though I would tell him, don't ship that one....

Q. Yes?

A. ...Well, you know, we'd try to ship the stores according to the placements of orders, but the shipping clerks would always do something and tell you they forgot, or made some alibi because they'd get paid off in tips. Let's see if we left out anything important. Just to cite an example to you: Freddie Pomerantz knew a world of people too. That was the beginning of his big success in the business. Everyone liked him. So when he opened, I'd say he knew pretty near everyone worthwhile knowing in the business at that.... The buyers I'm talking about, or merchandise men and presidents.
Q. Right.
A. And that's your big success. See, I learned a great deal through some of these prominent men that were the heads of stores; when I used to lunch with them I used to learn a great deal from them. We would discuss mostly the dress business. Only sometimes some of them would discuss golf or hunting and....
Q. Sailing?
A. Sailing and....
Q. Tennis?
A. Tennis? Not so much. Golf, a great deal. And mostly addressing the business. That was the reason for your lunch or meeting them at their office. I found them all very interesting. I've learned a great deal from all of the most important men in the business. I'm talking about the merchandise men and the heads of stores, Presidents and Vice Presidents, I used to meet them all and the buyers of course. Some of them were very clever like yourself.
Q. Thank you.
A. But times have changed. The buyers are all different buyers today. I'd say, ninety percent are not there. Those that were made changes as years went on and finally some of them retired, some of them went with the
manufacturers, some got married. You know, a lot of things happen in all these years I've been in business. But a lot of old timers still call me on an average of once or twice a year.

Q. Ben, how do you, what do you feel about the specialty stores versus department stores for the couture merchandise?

A. Well, they're very wonderful to have, especially the ones that pay their bills. Many of them are very limited with money. Knowing them all so well for so many years, I lost a great deal of money with a lot of specialty shops. Now with department stores. I had one or two losses in my lifetime. With specialty shops, I took big losses because they didn't have sufficient money to carry on. The first failure on Fifty Seventh Street, I think was, wasn't it J. Thorpe? Or...?

Q. I think so, yes.

A. Yes. But eventually he paid back but the others didn't pay back.

Q. If we could agree that you were probably the first person who really took so many different designers under his wing, is there somebody that you can point to who is coming up, who will do the same kind of thing?
A. I don't think anyone... is doing what I did, because it was all separate corporations.

Q. Well, I'm just wondering... No, I don't know of anybody doing what you did.

A. I know quite a few people that started doing what I did, but they associated it under the same roof.

Q. And, just to wrap it up, why did you operate the way that you did?

A. I can't explain that because I just loved meeting people and doing something different and something new all the time. And, I don't really know why. I always wanted to do something... The minute my business became successful, I looked for something different and something new.

Q. A new challenge?

A. Mostly a challenge, that's right. I call it a challenge but it really wasn't even that. Sometimes I felt I had enough room, enough time--but I'm sorry I did it. I should have stuck to one house, I'd be much better off.

Q. Why?

A. Well, if you'd stick to one house, it would build up in those days to thirty, forty, fifty million dollars. See, a couture house, in my days, was limited to six, six and a half million dollars. Maybe they'd stretch
to seven but today couture houses do much more.

Q. But you think that you....
A. Because the prices are higher.

Q. ...You would have preferred to do just that?
A. Well...

Q. With one person?
A. I say that, but I don't think I would do it I, even today I wouldn't be able to do that. But I'm going to go back and I've got designers calling me all the time. I just want to take my time and maybe within the next sixty, seventy, ninety days, I might make a decision.

Q. At the moment you really don't have any ties with anybody?
A. No.

Q. So you're going to decide which kind of merchandise you want to....
A. Yes. Sportswear is really number one and that's the one that's the toughest for me because you have to break it up. You know, your blouses are made in one factory, your pants are made in another factory, your tops are made in another factory.

Q. So you think you have to decide whether you want sportswear or....?
A. Dresses.

Q. Dresses.

A. It's so troublesome making dresses in America because you can't get a factory with all good operators or tailors. I'd say out of every good factory, half the workers are very good; the other half trail along. That's the average unless you want to be a Galanos and pay each individual a great deal of money.

Q. So that, what your suggesting, in a way, is that we need more training for people to be good workers?

A. Oh, yes. You need the real.... And the only way they can get training is working with manufacturers and starting at the beginning in factories or at the dressmaking end of it with the designers so as to learn how to drape and actually make the garment themselves. My partner Guido di Natale, he was a very good man.

Q. Right.

A. When he got out of the navy, his uncle who was one of my patternmakers, trained him and he went to school to learn how to make an entire garment. It took him quite a long time, but he became a first class patternmaker. But you don't do that by just going to school without getting the real training.

Q. So that what you're saying is, really, that people should
go to school and go to work....

A. ...But they have to spend at least five hours or more
a day at the job. For example, most of my people went
back to school even though they had knowledge of pattern-
making, or dressmaking, or tailoring. They went to school
to teach the others while they were training themselves.
See, in the old days, I used to import most of my help.
I mean, bring them over from Europe. I had a very good
alibi, which was true, that I brought them over to teach
the others how to sew, or how to become patternmakers;
that's why I was permitted to have them come into this
country.

Q. Were these mostly from Italy?

A. From Italy, Czechoslovakia, Romania. There were some,
I'd say more than half were from Italy, I'd say sixty
percent. You know what they'd do after they were with
you a while: they'd get to know the business very well
and become Americanized and get to speak very well.
Then they'd go out and get big jobs. See, they're all
spread out, the people I had working for me as sample-
hands in the patternmaking and designing rooms. One
good samplehand can teach five others how to work.
So they became supervisors. And some of them are sup-
ervisors of very big plants today but they gained the
experience with me.

Q. So, you're saying, really, that people who get their training in school also need the experience....

A. Must have the experience.

Q. The business experience?

A. Unless they just want to make a stitch. A lot of kids at school, I must admit, learn by themselves how to become dressmakers and can put a whole dress together. But that's a small percentage. Perhaps four out of a hundred, who go into the school because growing up they did tailoring on their own or learned themselves how to make dresses, and jackets.

Q. And, of course, in order to know whether something is capable of being made they have to, themselves, have had the experience of doing it.

A. See, its quite an art to be a good dressmaker or a patternmaker or a tailor. You know, it's really an art and it's a very tough job; you have to be very knowledgeable about dimensions and proportions and grading.

Q. Right. Well, I think we've covered just about....

A. That's about all unless I come up with some other crazy idea.

Q. Okay.

- 105 -

End of Tape 2, Side 2
Transcripts housed in Special Collections:

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

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

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