ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION, F.I.T.

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

EMANUEL WEINTRAUB

Date of Interview
January 24, 1985

Interviewed by
Mildred Finger
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Q. ....For the Oral History Collections of the Fashion Institute of Technology, and for the oral history of the school itself, this will be an interview with Emanuel Weintraub. The date is January 24, 1985; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Tell me, Mr. Weintraub: What year were you graduated and what was your major?

A. In 1947, Industrial Management.

Q. Then you were among the first graduates, right?

A. Yes.

Q. The very first graduating class, I think, was in '46. So that put you into the second graduating class.

A. Right.

Q. And you were an Industrial Management major.

A. Yes.

Q. How did that happen? How did that come about? Because that was, I would think, somewhat unusual for a young person to be interested in. Tell us something about your own background. Where you were born and when and...

A. Well, I was born in New York City, in the Bronx, in 1928, just prior to the the Depression.

Q. Which is a pretty significant thing to have as your....

A. Right. The Depression influenced my mentality and my thinking very heavily, because it was a period where poverty was no shame, because everybody had it. And you understood what minimal existence was, and
so you became very highly motivated out of sheer necessity.

Q. What did your father do?

A. My father was an entrepreneur. He was a jobber of upholsterer's supplies. So that would be the material that went inside upholstered furniture. And in those days a decorator was not someone who did your apartment, but rather, one who reupholstered your couch or your sofa or made your drapes; physically did that work. So, he and his two brothers had a business called Weintraub Brothers, and it was a minimal-marginal business, but I guess you would say a rousing success, because it survived during the Depression and they were able to feed their families.

Q. Did you ever have any temptation to go into his business? Was that... any thought in your head?

A. Yes. I did, but we had different attitudes about business and so that was a short lived affair.

Q. What do you mean by different business attitudes? In what way?

A. Well, my father was a very satisfied type and I was a very dissatisfied type.

Q. In other words, you really wanted to grow the business more than he did. Is that right?

A. Right. A different focus.

Q. You went to an elementary school in the Bronx?

A. Yes. Then I went to... In those periods in New York City, people moved around a lot, for economic reasons, so I went to elementary
school in the Bronx... No, I never went to elementary school in the Bronx. By the time I was ready for elementary school we were living with my grandmother, who was a very important influence on my life. She was an entrepreneur... She had a ....

Q. Was she?
A. She had a juvenile carriage store at 147th Street and Amsterdam Avenue and she was illiterate except that she could write her name to sign checks.

Q. Yes. But had she come from Europe herself?
A. Oh, sure. She was an entrepreneur... She ruled with an iron hand, but she was a lady who was, under all that structure, very liberal minded, so one daughter is a graduate of Fordham Law School and died as a sitting judge, in the days when women did not do anything but have children and run their homes. Her daughters were all business and career minded back in the '30s.

Q. And were you the only son?
A. I have a younger brother.

Q. A younger brother. Right. So there you were. You got out of elementary school. And you went to high school where?

Q. Right. Right. And then what brought you to F.I.T.? Or to what was....
A. Well, would you like a... Which story would you like?
Q. I had just asked how you came to F.I.T.
A. I came to F.I.T. ... I heard about it from a friend, that it was a new school starting up. Its attraction to me was that if you got in, it was going to be free, and my parents could not afford to send me to a school that charged tuition.
Q. And you did not have any idea while you were in high school, for example, what you might be wanting to do....
A. No one in our family had any connection with the apparel or sewing products industries, or anything related to that.
Q. So you had just heard about F.I.T., and that it was a free school and...
A. A place to get an education beyond...
Q. Because you had already gone to high school....
A. Oh, yes.
Q. This was going to be an extra year or two years, whatever it was. And what did you study?
A. Industrial design, and I decided to buckle down to work and was awarded a scholarship after my first...Sometime after my first semester. And the scholarship meant a cash stipend in addition to tuition, which was very, very helpful.
Q. But I thought you said F.I.T. was free.
A. It was free. This was cash...
Q. In addition...
A. You won a scholarship, and you got the money to sustain you with carfare or whatever...

Q. But you didn't live down at the school, of course, since the didn't have the facilities.

A. No. It was on two floors of the high school, as you know.

Q. Two floors of the Needle Trades High School, yes.

So you commuted back and forth every day to your parents' house.

And in Industrial Management, what kind of courses did you take? And what kind of faculty did you have?

A. Well, we had a good faculty. In retrospect, I think the courses were very well thought out. The courses included were industrial management and engineering courses....

Q. Relating to the garment industry? Production?

A. Well, when you get into that kind of statement, these courses were all taught—in retrospect, now—they would follow the same format no matter where they would be taught, and the only difference would be that the case study material would be geared to one industry. So if you were taking this course at Case Western Reserve, they might have a case study about an electric motor facility. We had a case study about a shirt facility. When you study raw materials, you're studying fabric and knitting and that kind of thing, relative to the soft goods industries. And then your academic courses were pretty classic: English and Sociology and Philosophy and History of Art and that sort of thing. And considering that it was a two year
school, it was very intensive. I don't recall how many hours we put in in a day, but they were long days. It was not your 16 hours of classroom a week. It was a lot more...If memory serves me right...

Q. Yes...If memory serves you right. You studied...

A. But you can check that. I'm sure there are records....

Q. But in your own experience, what kinds of courses did you find the most helpful?

A. Each, in hindsight, each in its own way was helpful. Now there were a couple of courses that I recognize were very poorly taught and I went to NYU to study those.

Q. What were they?

A. Motion study and time study. And I had the great good fortune to study with Dr. David Porter...

Q. At NYU.

A. At NYU. He was one of the great names in the field. At the time he was teaching me he was a man in his sixties, but as a young man he had worked with the Galbraiths (they would be known to you...They were the people in "Cheaper by the Dozen.") They were the people who really organized the field of work simplification and the function analysis. Fred W. Taylor, around the turn of the century, was another great name. But this Dr. Porter was very influential. And then I guess I felt I was getting...they weren't working us hard enough, so I went to City College at night and got...
Q. While you were at F.I.T.?
A. Yes. I was going to NYU or... As a boy, I was a product of what's known as the R.A. system in New York City...Rapid Advancement.

Q. 7th Grade in one year, 8th grade in one year... 8th grade in one year, 9th grade in one year...
A. When I graduated high school I wasn't 17; I was still 16. So I had great energy and I was fairly well rounded in my...So the courses that I felt were inadequate at that time I got elsewhere.

Q. When you say inadequate, were you already beginning to think of a much higher level of achievement than would be made possible to you...
A. I just felt those courses were inadequate.

Q. They didn't offer you enough...
A. They were taught by people who were bright, but did just not do, in my opinion, a good job of teaching the material.

Q. Did they have academic backgrounds or did they have industry backgrounds? Were you aware...
A. The people who taught the courses were very well qualified in the course, but they just did not do a good job teaching that material at that time. My father was good enough to give me the money to...
Q. ...to supplement those things. Either at NYU or at City.

A. Right.

Q. When you were finished at F.I.T....were you getting an Associate degree at that time?

A. No.

Q. Not yet. So you had a certificate of some kind. And did you then go on to a four year college?

A. No.

Q. What was your next step after the schooling...?

A. I went to work at the Lily of France corset company.

Q. Oh! Uh huh. So you did go into the industry.

A. Oh, yes. I went into the industry.

Q. On the production side?

A. Yes. As a plant engineer....

Q. At that time, were the facilities in New York or...?

A. The facilities were all at 1115 Broadway. And I had the good fortune to have as a supervisor a very bright man who is a friend of mine to this day. A fellow by the name of George Knight....A very bright guy. A classic industrial engineer, from Columbia University. He subsequently went on to get a law degree... So he gave me a lot of good grooming.

Q. Was the family still very much involved in Lily of France? You don't know?
A. . . . The one thing that happened to me at Lily of France is I had the opportunity to do the original work on a product that still exists to this day, which is called "the enhancer." It was a weight control garment...

Q. How long did you stay at Lily of France?
A. About eight or nine months.
Q. And then from there?
A. From there I went to a company called Kaylart and they made pajamas. And I went to work in Baltimore, Maryland and then Stanton, Virginia. They had facilities in both those places. And that was my first experience with an out-of-New York manufacturing facility and I...

Q. Was this a children's wear firm?
A. No. It was pajamas. Men's and women's pajamas.
Q. I just didn't know the name of the firm.
A. And then from there I went to work at Goldsmith Brothers in Allentown, Pennsylvania. They made handbags. And there I was hired to be the chief industrial engineer, and there was a consulting firm called George H. Elliot & Company...I guess I always wanted to be a consultant. And they were doing the consulting and I had a chance to work with their engineers, and...

Q. But you worked directly for Goldsmith's. Not for the consulting firm.
A. Yes. And the idea was when the consulting program was
over I would take responsibility of that particular assignment. Then from that point I went to work for ... a company in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Columbia, Pennsylvania, actually, to be precise...

Q. And in each case, you lived right in the...
A. And there I was in charge of engineering for about five factories. And one of the problems you have when you're young and full of energy and full of ideas, is that you want to reorganize existing companies, and the problem with that is that the management and ownership resist ideas from youthful people because they say they don't have experience. So that brings on the inevitable clash, and it is management that votes its votes, and you find out that you're without a job. So at that point, the Korean War was underway and I enlisted in the regular army, the Infantry, for the Korean War. I was too young for World War II...

Q. Yes. I was just calculating...
A. This caught my sense of adventure. I was honorably discharged in 1952, and at that point I decided that I was going to go into my own consultant practice.

Q. Now, as a consultant...What kind of consulting were you planning to do? Or what do you do?
A. What do I do, or what was I planning to do?
Q. Both. If they're different.
A. Well, what our firm does...I have a firm...And the name
is Emanuel Weintraub Associates, Inc. Our firm today is a company that provides services in several areas: one is industrial engineering and manufacturing; another is in organization and organization structure. And a third is marketing and market research.

Q. And do you operate primarily in the fashion related industries?

A. I would say that about 70% of our practice is in the sewing products industries and the rest is in government studies, the hotel industry, light metal working, a wide range.

Q. Which might represent 30% of your...okay. As an F.I.T. graduate, did you ever have the occasion to report back to the school and mention to anybody that there were things you thought they should strengthen in their curriculum. Did you ever have any kind of relationship like that with anybody there?

A. A number of years ago Marv Feldman had a panel that had to do the report with regards to going to a four year program as a college. And I was happy to serve on that.

Q. How did you know him, or how did he know you? How did he find you?

A. We found Marvin. I always kept in close contact with the Presidents of F.I.T. 

Q. Oh, you have! So you have had contact with them. That's what I...

A. And we do seminars...
Q. Your company.
A. Yes. And so early in his tenure at F.I.T. he was good enough to be a luncheon speaker at some of the seminars that we ran.

Q. Well, have you made suggestions to them at any point about what additional courses they might... give the students, in the areas in which you are trained?
A. Not recently. But...

Q. In years gone by.
A. In the management department . . . .

Q. I just wondered if there had ever been dialogues in which you could express what you felt about the various departments and how they could be strengthened so they would give the students greater depth or greater breadth...
A. I would say I've never really been formally asked, so....

Q. So you've never reviewed the curriculum, as it is now constituted, for example. During the days when you were going there, how many students were there approximately?
A. It was very small. I couldn't tell you.

Q. In your own department?
A. I was the graduating class of my year.

Q. In your own particular....
A. (inaudible)

Q. There have been a lot of people, have there not, who have
gone into production in the garment industry?
  A. Yes.
  Q. Through what course, or what curriculum or curricula....
  A. In my year
  Q. Well, you had mentioned your graduating class and that's why I was curious. We hadn't mentioned any numbers at all.
  A. Something like that. It's a matter of record. But if memory serves me right, I was the lone survivor of the class of February, '47.
  Q. But would people who wanted to become production executives have taken the program that you had taken? Was the curriculum intended for people going into production?
  A. Oh, yes.
  Q. It was. But you don't know of any people in your year, since you were the only graduate...
  A. Well, I knew people who were either a year ahead of me or a year behind me. I knew some of those people, and many of them went on to be very, very successful.
  Q. All right. After we finish, I going to ask you for some names, because I'm interested in people who went into things other than design, other than retailing and merchandising, as the years went on.

If you had some advice to give to F.I.T. today, what would you tell them that you think they ought to do? Or how to specialize?
or should they specialize? Or what should they do? Now that it's a four year school there may be some who will go on. Or there's no reason why some might not want to go on to other kinds of graduate work, if that is what you thought was significant.

A. I don't have any particular advice. If you're a decent student motivated to go there, then you couldn't go to a nicer school.

Q. You did not know many of your contemporaries there, I assume, from what you've said. I was just wondering what kinds of backgrounds people came from....

A. I don't follow...I obviously knew the people who were there in the...

Q. Yes. But if you were one person in a class which was graduated from F.I.T. I don't know how well you might have gotten to know them as friends. And I'm interested in knowing what the population of the school consisted of then. Were they kids whose families were in the business, in the ready-to-wear business? Or was it totally unrelated to people who were in the industry? Do you have any sense of that at all?

A. I really didn't hear too many people tell me that their fathers had...In retrospect; I'm trying to think back ...That they were in the business.

Q. It's interesting to note, after all this...Even though
ILGWU has lost a lot of workers in the past 10-15 years, it is interesting that the industry has survived as long as it has, and that companies have not necessarily had offspring going into the businesses, even though many have had a second generation. But, obviously, people keep going into the business. So I'm just curious to know whether the demographics of the school reflect any particular population, or just....

A. You mean currently, or....?

Q. Well, at any time...

A. I would say really to get an accurate reflection of that you'd have to go back to the school records. They probably have it on computer. Somebody could have the task to do that; to check the records...

Q. Do you have children?

A. Yes.

Q. Do they have any desire to go into a field that you are?

A. My daughter works for Brooks Brothers.

Q. She does. And what was her training?

A. Market research. And she's been with our firm, after two years of industry prior...

Q. Which industry did she go into ?

A. She was with Sharp, the Japanese photocopy company. And then she was with a telephone...
Q. A telephone servicing company?
A. A telephone company, I think, that marketed telephone systems.

Q. And she was never interested, really, I gather, in the fashion related industries in the area.
A. She's a very good consultant. She works on her own at different consulting assignments, primarily in marketing and organization. She has worked on some studies, manufacturing oriented, where with what she had learned in school she could be of assistance to the other consultants, obviously. But her primary concentration is marketing.

Q. Do you think that there are skills that are not being taught to F.I.T. students today, that you know about. In the recent experiences, when you've been part of the seminars with Marvin Feldman, for example...

A. The seminars we ran in the industry with Marvin was just...

Q. He was just the speaker. Right.
A. We employ some F.I.T. people, but what I don't know, in hindsight, is whether we are being unfair. Do we expect them to get out of school and have ten years experience? Of course, that's not...I don't think there's any ...I think they're doing a fine job, really. You know. There are things...

Q. How about reading and writing?
A. That's a problem. No one can read and write. That has nothing to do with F.I.T. It has to do with...People cannot write, and in consulting that is very important. To express a thought cogently and convey what your true meaning is...But I wouldn't say that has to do with F.I.T. You pick up any newspaper, from the New York Times to the Wall Street Journal, and you can find writing that were it coming from our office would not get by.

Q. Would you edit it or just not...take it.

A. Of course I edit our reports to make sure that they have a clarity to them, and that they convey the correct thought. Because in management consulting you are conveying complex interpretations of data, and the significance of data, so that management can take action on it.

Q. When you talk about a component of your business being organization structure, do you mean...Would you, for example, go into the fashion business...Go into an apparel manufacturing firm and help them to reconstruct things so that their production facilities, let's say, are moved from here to there? Are you technically knowledgeable about that kind of business?

A. Organization...You will go into a company...any company...and assess from the top down. Some of our clients are major public companies. One division we went into, the Chairman of the Board wanted us to assess that division from the President to the shipping dock. So we drew an organization
analysis which we call "top-down, bottom-up" ... The perception from the top down, and the perception from the bottom up, to determine whether the organization was in harmony with itself in terms of its own functioning. And once you've got that data there are many other inputs. ... And we will then look at what we feel can be a true functioning organization. Because in a company you have pyramidal structure. The chief is on top.... But the way institutions or businesses really work, that determines who can hire and fire and get the corner window. But the way work takes place, we find that groups form and reform, so you may have the President's assistant working with two Vice Presidents and the assistant is really the leader of that group for that particular task to take place. And then that group breaks and a new group forms later in the day to do some other sets of tasks. So the pyramidal hierachy is essentially the military function, and we think in terms of something we call a snowflake or "Newton's" concept where you've got one individual in the center and then all these molecules around them. And these groups form and reform, and then if you can get to something more complex, a more complex group of tasks, these other parts will impact on each other.

Q. It sounds to me as though you've done a lot of innovative conceptual thinking. I don't know where you could have
learned that... Did you learn it anywhere....

A. I've just been reading the experts and finding out that half the time they're wrong.

Q. And coming up with your own...

A. We did a study in the '70s in response to the subject of blue collar blues; that workers are... disaffected because they had so-called dull boring jobs and so on and so forth. And our office did a study, at its own cost and expense, on a national scope, where we said, well the most confining job we can think of is a sewing machine operator. Confined to that space, a three and a half foot table, working all day long, sewing on pockets or stitching left flies or hemming cuffs, or whatever. So we interviewed, from New Bedford, to Dallas, and in New Bedford the interviews were in both Portuguese and English, and in Dallas they were in Spanish... We did all types of research. And what we found is that... at least at that point in time.... That those workers were basically interested in the economic issues and more leisure time; job security, comparable pay, leisure time, and more pay. And all the other issues rank very, very low. We had a very complex questionnaire. We had True-False, which tested against multiple choice. We had written questions.

Q. Essays.

A. It was in the Times. It was on the radio. The
British equivalent of Fortune came over to do an interview...
The conclusion that we came to is that the social scientists are attaching their views to people who don't necessarily share their views. We haven't studied this recently, but every time you get a recession you find out that what people are interested in is "a job." And the idea of openness, communication, worker participation--good companies always had that.

Q. But you mentioned the sewing machine operator. Was that a happenstance that you used that as an illustration, or have you had some contact with the industry? With sewing apparel?

A. Oh, some of our practice is in sewing products.

Q. When you say sewing products, that includes a lot of things that are not necessarily apparel...

A. Home furnishings. But it's the same... Handbags or leather products...

Q. Then, I wonder if I can ask you a broader question. Do you have any feeling about such things as off shore production? Do you have any opinions on that?

A. I get published right here.

Q. I know you do, but could you put a little bit of it into your oral history because I am fascinated that you are obviously such a conceptual thinker. I mean, that's not usual
in our business.

A. Well, I'm in the consulting business. In the production field.

Q. I know.

A. So we currently have more than 40% import in apparel and we are competing against countries that manufacture money. Think of Red China. Red China is paying their workers in domestic currency, which is totally unrelated to the hard currency that you as a tourist bring and buy things with. And if they need another billion dollars for their exchange account, they're just going to make that many more shirts or whatever, and the cost is secondary. Because those workers can't change their money for our currency. And I would say this is true in most of the restricted countries in the world. So if you compound that with the over valued dollar, you will find that our imports are very cheap. And what all that means, when it all boils down, is that the fibre-apparel-textile complex right now is at extreme risk, unless we can find ways to swallow the rising tide of importing, which is moving tremendously...You had in 1984 a move that we had projected...We projected in late '83 or early '84 that if the rate of imports remained stable you'd get 29% ... But if the rate continued to rise you would have over 40%. And so you had mill plant closings that is
Q. If off shore production continues at that level, then the nature of the industry in this country would appear to be largely the design aspect, marketing and selling. Right?

A. Absolutely. It's been in the last 4-5 years that it's accelerated and it's changed to reflect that. And if you think that...If you take an industry, such as the handbag industry --which, according to its executive director--is now 90% import impacted. So for every ten handbags that you sell, nine of them were made outside the U.S.

Q. And the shoe industry too. Right?

A. And shoes. But you think of other fields. Everybody loves Japanese television sets and Korean TV sets, and nobody is really feeling particularly remorseful about the fact that their TV sets are no longer made by RCA in Camden, New Jersey.

Q. But as you see it, it would appear as though the elements that will remain in this country, in the fashion oriented industries are the design and marketing and selling? And the distribution.

A. Oh, sure. But as you lose production...If you lose a sufficient amount of production, it accelerates the further loss of production, and as production moves to different sites
than the production market, marketing will eventually follow behind it. So when you abandon, as we have...consumer electronics manufacturing in the United States, we now find that our largest marketers of consumer electronics are Sanyo and Sony and Panasonic. These are the firms that originally manufactured under contract for American firms. I think that we will in time see a wresting away of the design and marketing into strong hands from foreign firms. So you are really talking about the eventual...Over what period of time I don't know...But I think you could look forward to that because history is...

Q. You didn't finish that sentence...The eventual what?

A. The eventual dismemberment of this industry as we know it. History is a great predictor of the future. So if you look at other industries, like electronics...Electronics was dominated by American firms, but that is no longer so, because once you know how to do it you then build on that. And certainly the Japanese designers are making an impact in the United States. But when this would happen...Because apparel is such a fragmented industry...remains to be seen.

Q. But it's a possibility.

A. I would say it's a strong possibility. You know, you have to weave into this the impact of electronics teleconferencing, your ability to wire your patterns across the wall. The ability
of getting your samples. Of wiring your patterns...You're familiar with the technology of grading and marketing.

Q. Yes.

A. The marketplace conceivably can, with the assistance of electronics, bring your patterns up on any one of a number of computer grading and marking systems. Wire it over...within minutes they've got it. Bango. They're sewing their samples. Then they're marketing the product.

Q. The only thing you can hope for is that the creative element can't be transmitted that fast.

A. But what's happening is that the creative ideas are transmittable. So...Let's talk about creativity. You want to go to San Francisco? You go fast... You want to go to Hong Kong? It's important? You jump on a Concorde. You're there in a day. You can be there and back in a week.

Q. One thing we didn't talk about is teaching.

A. Twenty-five or twenty-eight years ago I had an opportunity to become a member of the faculty of NYU, and so I taught both in Washington Square and up at the engineering campus, and my office was on lower Broadway. I belonged to the Faculty Club, when I moved my office was uptown. I joined the NYU Club, and served two terms on the Board of Directors... that's it.

Q. Thank you a lot.