ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION, F.I.T.

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

JOHN WEITZ

Menswear Designer

Date of Interview

Wednesday, October 5, 1983
Thursday, October 6, 1983

Interviewed by

Mildred Finger
John Weitz is an extremely creative man, best known perhaps for his designs of menswear. He has also designed women's wear, cars, and many other products. He is a writer and a photographer as well. Born in Germany, he has been in the U.S. since the age of 18. He started in women's sportswear in this country and then moved on to menswear. Earlier in his life, he had been to school in England, and got his first introduction to design through a brief "apprenticeship" at Molyneux.
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Q: ...for the Oral History Collections of the Fashion Institute of Technology, this will be an interview with John Weitz, prominent menswear designer. The date is October 5, 1983; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

John, would you start at the very beginning and tell us where you were born and when you were born and what the circumstances of your family were?

A: I was born in 1923 in Berlin, the only child of a typical German, or Berlin Jewish industrialist and his wife. They were play people of the '20s, who enjoyed themselves grandly because Berlin in the '20s was frothy, interesting, fascinating; full of cabarets, nonsense, debauchery, cocaine. My father was First World War, frontline soldier, highly decorated. He made a great fortune after the war and felt that he was entitled to it.

Q: Was he in the textile business?

A: He was in the textile business. He was among the earliest investors in a thing called rayon, believe it or not, in Germany.

Q: Had his family been in the textile business too?

A: No.

Q: He started it.

A: He started it. My maternal family were in...founded a life insurance company which still exists; the biggest life insurance company in Germany. So I was, like a lot of boys of my generation, very quickly brought up lovingly for a few years and then sent off to boarding school in Britain. And in those days you sent boys either to England or to Switzerland.

Q: How old were you?

A: Nine. It was standard. They were play years, in which people
had other things to do than bringing up children.

Q: So this was really pre-Hitler, or just...

A: Oh, yes. This was substantially before Hitler. Substantially before Hitler. Well...Before Hitler; not substantially before it. I was in boarding school in Britain at St. Paul's School when Hitler was at his most forceful, but I returned to Germany every year for two vacations and I don't think I was quite as aware as I should have been of the fact that the circumstances of our life were changing through limitations that I failed to recognize.

Q: Well, you were pretty young.

A: It wasn't only that. I was also a Brittanically brought up schoolboy who refused to acknowledge that anyone could assume that I might be inferior. I was not too willing to accept that as a dictum on the part of anybody, but it got to be fairly obvious to me when one day I went to the German consulate in London to get my passport renewed, as usual, and it was returned to me with a normal renewal except that a red letter "J" had been stamped into the front of it to denote the fact that I was a Jew, and the name "Israel" had been added to my rather Teutonic first name...

Q: In Britain.

A: Yes. Well, I was a German subject. And they had every right to do so from their point of view, since it was legal for them to identify Germans from Jews. It was hard to do by name, because German and Jewish names, as you know, are interchangeable. The head race theoretician of the German...of the Nazi regime was called Alfred Rosenberg. If you were to say today that there's a Bah Mitzvah upcoming and that Rabbi Alfred...
Rosenberg is presiding, nobody would assume that that isn't a Jew. For a long time in the Nazi hierarchy, the gag was to call him Alfred Israel Rosenberg in order to let people know that deep in his soul there lurked some Jewish blood. Which it didn't, by the way.

Anyway, I found out quickly that I was to be named something else; I was Jewish.

Q: Also, did you have any siblings, or were you the only child?
A: I am an only child. It was part of the time. We all were only children. The parents of Berlin in the '20s had no time for more than one child. One had fulfilled one's duty; the rest of the time one danced and had a great time, partied, and debauched if one so wished. I can tell you though that my contact with my parents, for several years, consisted of meeting my mother in Paris during the couture time because she bought her wardrobe there. And meeting my father in Switzerland or to ski or on the coast of Normandy to sail. That was our life, and it was an amusing and funny and witty life, if one saw it as such. On the other hand, I can tell you that when I was a boy there was a man who later on became a famous fashion editor in America, working for Vogue, who was then a charming, handsome young Russian refugee smoking, snuffing cocaine. It was part of that life and I knew it. Everybody knew it. "So-and-so uses cocaine. So-and-so is lesbian. So-and-so is gay. So-and-so lives with so-and-so--two males." It was a world in which that was recognized and probably perfect as a point of preparation for a heterosexual upcoming fashion designer, because in order to survive the fashion business with any degree, as a designer, of sanity...I'll rephrase that: In order to survive as a designer with any degree of sanity, as a heterosexual,
you have to understand and be lovingly understanding of the homosexual world, because ours is a homosexual profession. And no matter how many times somebody says that is not so, that is so. Right now, a great amount of the menswear in America is being presented to American men by homosexuals. That would be, if I were to say to you that 90% of the women's clothes being presented to America's women are designed for them by lesbians, it would bring on a certain thought process that doesn't seem to occur to most people, because the American menswear designer is obviously a transplant from the women's business, and the idea that the women's designer is mainly homosexual is not a strange one.

I bring all this up because, quite cruelly, the day came when I apprenticed at the business of fashion design—though in those days a thing called dressmaking and tailoring; it wasn't grandly seen as design. It was seen as being a dressmaker, a tailor. The word is couturier, which means tailor.

Q: Let's just go back a little bit. That happened while you were still in school.

A: No, it happened in my first year at university. I was at St. Paul's School in London and just short of the age of 16, I went to university; I passed my entrance exams to Oxford and I was there a very few months, "reading," as the British would say, history, which was my chosen subject, when I realized I was miserable. Everybody else around me was 19 and terribly worldly. It was like going to school with Brideshead Revisited. And there I was, having to face that world, and I couldn't take it. The 22 year old and the 20 year old and 19 year old chic young lords down the hallway thought I
was a very amusing, nice young Jewish boy of no great brain and wit who obviously knew his history. And so in London I met an old friend who had gone to school with me at St. Paul's School and said he was now working as an assistant to a famous couture house and would I care to come down on weekends and have a crack at it? Because it was fun, and there were a lot of pretty girls. I thought both of those were fair offerings and I could learn something so I went to learn the business of dressmaking and tailoring from a famous old dressmaker.

Q: What was his name?
A: Molyneux.

Q: Did you work for John Cavanagh before that?
A: No, no. John was a schoolmate of mine.

Q: Ah hah!
A: John was at St. Paul's School. He's the one who said to me, "Come to work. I'm an apprentice." John was...

Q: He lived down the hall.
A: ...a boy who was in school one year ahead of me, who was then himself an apprentice in the late 1930's and comparatively antique.

Quickly, then, to my apprenticeship. And then the world descended on me...

Q: I'm sorry. Was Molyneux then in London?
A: London. He had a small house in London and a big one in Paris. But I learned the basic thing about the making of clothes, which is that it is your job to provide a certain amount of inspiration but most of all to cater to people; to what they wanted and what they need, and to learn your
Q: Did you learn the technical parts of dressmaking?

A: Oh, of course. Oh, God, yes. You couldn't, in those days, work without learning draping and cutting and sewing. I'm still the only one...Whenever things go wrong in our house, they say, "Dad will sew it." You know, it's still great fun. For me, it's mechanical. And whenever someone says to me, "Isn't that a terribly feminine thing to do?" what I do is I hand them an awl and an 18 foot jenny on my boat and say, "Here, Sew the clou on that one, which any sailmaker can do." Because sewing is sewing. It's part of our lives. If you're a cowboy you've got to learn how to sew, because every time a leather strap comes apart you've got to sew it up.

So, I learned it and liked it. It was great fun. And most of all I liked women. I think they're perfectly wonderful. I think it was... Until that time I never thought to realize what it's like to deal with women.

Q: Did you enjoy making clothes to order and dealing with all those...?

A: That's basically what it was. You dealt with a certain amount of bitchery. There was a woman swelling and shrinking; there was a woman divorced or not divorced. We had a person who was only there to keep tabs on the kept women who were clients so that if the romance broke up, if the affair ended, we, who might have had orders for eight things, only delivered two because we didn't know if Monsieur would still pay the bills, etc., etc. It was a full introduction to utter and happy bitchiness of the world of fashion. And the only place in America that I ever saw anything like it was in the American
millinery business. When the American millinery business was at its height, in the John Frederick days, all the way through Halston's stay at Bergdorf's, there was that unbelievable, marvelous sense of slightly venomous bitchiness that to me was part and parcel of the fashion business.

So, I learned my craft, the basic craft. I also learned, I guess, how to deal with the business of sales and what it was that made one couture house more successful than another, and why a woman would want to go to Chanel and spend a lot of money to prove that she was dressed by Chanel. Not to wear Chanel, but to prove that she too was dressed by Chanel, just like the Duchess of Kent, or whoever it was. Then the war descended on me in September....

Q: Before the war came, tell me this: Were you involved in sketching or selecting fabrics or in everything?

A: I was an apprentice.

Q: So you did it all. Or you did some of it.

A: It was a total, committee decision. You were involved in everything. What you did was...The collection was put together in muslin or in canvas. You then had a wall full of fabrics which had been ordered in small yardage. You then took the swatches of the fabrics--the cuttings as they were called in England--and married them to the canvas or to the muslin.

Q: And all of this was decided by committee.

A: Pretty much. Three or four of you stood around and said, "That chiffon would work very well in that dress," or "that jersey would work very well in that dress," or "I think that that melton would be lovely in that coat."
Q: How had the fabrics themselves been selected?

A: The fabrics were selected long before by the people at the mills either in Italy or in France, or a salesman came to you and showed them to you and you said you wanted ten meters of that and twenty meters of that, and twelve meters of that. And you kept them, usually things that you could use. If the fabrics were great, you put them into dumb silhouettes. If the fabrics were dumb, you put them into interesting new shapes. Because, obviously, if you have a fabric like a beige melton what you can do is cut them into anything from a polo coat into a short jacket. But the trick was what kind of a short jacket and what kind of a polo coat. It really didn't matter, because the collection was only a point of suggestion. The press were not involved. The press didn't matter a damn. Nobody cared. You saw the collection and maybe two or three elderly ladies...

Q: These were private clients.

A: Sure. Because the press came later. The American press were terribly funny because the American press at that time really behaved like Irish backstairs maids when it came to the couture. They came rushing in with two great ladies wanting their Légion d'Honneur on their Chanel suit, and they all got them. The fact is that the important thing were the clients. The clients were ladies who sat there and discussed with you what they had to do. "Oh, we have the yearly sail at Deauville," and then they had to be on the Riviera because, "So-and-so's launching a new yacht and we've been invited for a week. And then we have to go to London for some business meeting, and then we have two great court occasions that we have to go to, and then we're going to settle in in Paris for two weeks." So you knew exactly what was going to
go on and you had to make the clothes for it. Also, if a client saw a coat that was very interesting, and she said, "That's a lovely coat," and it was navy blue with gold buttons and quite long, and you called it Nelson in order to prove how "admiralish" it was, and she said, "I like that coat; I'd like it in beige with leather buttons, six inches shorter, or twelve centimeters shorter," we made it. We didn't argue. You didn't pout and say, "The grand maitre will not permit you to change his impeccable design." That came later. That came with the press and that came with wholesalers and that came with nice insecure manufacturers who arrived and said, "Oh, my God, the Holy Grail is here." Because they could meet people in the rue Jean Goujon in the Hotel Meurice...No...What was the name of the hotel...the hotel St. Regis. They would sit down and say, "Oh, my God. I hope that Mrs. Snow liked this one and Mrs. Chase liked that one." But the fact is that in my day, it mattered what the client wanted. It was the client who was more important than the couturier.

Q: Now, we're still talking about Molyneux in London.
A: We're still talking about any couture house at the time.
Q: And at that time about how many pieces did you make for a collection, or were made...?
A: They made...I guess they showed as many as fifty pieces, because they had to cover many ranges.
Q: Twice a year.
A: Twice a year. Two main seasons, and you had to cover everything from daytime coats to evening dresses. It was an extreme strain and a big pain because it was expensive to make those clothes. The model clothes,
after all, were useless. Once they had been worn enough you didn't know what to do with them. You couldn't sell them. It was an investment in expensive fabric and sewing. So everybody wished that there were clients who could come and say, "Why don't you figure out what I want without needing a collection," but nobody could get away with that. Every woman wanted a point of inspiration so that she could say, "No." That was very important. "No, that's not for me," was a much more important sentence than, "Yes, that's for me." And very often what you showed was done in order that the woman could say, "Yes, I'd like that, but much slimmer," etc. That did not include the insecure clients who came there in order to sit and consider themselves part of the club. They took the couturier's word. The grand clients, the grande dame knew exactly what she wanted. Nobody told the Duchess of Kent what kind of a skirt to wear. She knew. And the same way, no tailor taught the Prince of Wales how many buttons were to be on his vest. It was he who said to the tailor, "I think this year we shall try with a double breasted vest with 12 buttons, don't you?" And do you know what the fitter said? "Yes, your Royal Highness."

Q: Were you ever involved with men's clothes at all at this point?

A: No. Nobody was. Tailors were. There was no men's clothing design. There were great tailors on Saville Row who made the clothes for the gentry. And the gentry are the ones who set the style. Nobody knew who Beau Brummell's tailor was; all that mattered was Beau Brummell. That was the attitude. The client mattered.

In the case of the couturiers, because of a recent history--
comparatively, at that time—of great names (and I will enumerate)—

Poiret, Worth, Chanel; maybe Lanvin, I don't know that history;

Patou... But my guess is mainly Poiret, Worth, Chanel...

Q: How about Vionnet?

A: Vionnet. These were great names, and as a result, for

the first time the idea of the great dressmaker, not the little lady around

the corner, but of the establishment of the equivalent to the great restaurant,

the fashion equivalent to Maxim's—no longer the bistro, but the great

restaurant, appeared. I think it came out, probably out of the Edwardian
days. I do know that Teddy Roosevelt at one point was so impressed by the

name "Poiret," that when some Poiret clothes were shown, it was he who punned,

"hip, hip Poiret." Which shows that even then there was a certain amount

of attention paid, internationally, to the great. Poiret, by the way, was a

very stout gentleman with a beard—the antithesis of today's Anatole of Paris—

Danny Kaye figure, who is the modern equivalent, supposedly, of the dressmaker.

The attitude at the time was very paternal toward a woman. "Let Daddy show

you what to wear, my dear girl." And the same, Chanel's attitude was,

"Little sister, I will take care of you. Shut up and listen." There was not

the sorority of the dressmaker, and later on the milliner, who said, "Oh, let's

you and I get together and you're going to wear what I'd really like to wear."

Which is a very different attitude. The female budding manqué in many a designer,

who says, "Oh, if I could only wear that! Well, she's very beautiful; we'll

make it for her." So, the drag attitude was not there at the time. That is

the reason that I think the names became so big. They were forceful personalities

who were almost paternal in their attitudes.
I only had a very small snootful of it and then I learned the superficialities at the time, but I did learn the craft and I've always been able to sketch well. Sketching, by the way, is so vitally important that any designer who thinks, unless they own manufacturing company, that they can make a living as a designer without sketching is in desperate trouble.

Q: I think there are two schools, aren't there? Pauline Trigere cuts everything in fabric...

A: Pauline Trigere is a dressmaker. I adore her and worship her. Pauline Trigere could at this point of the game make a very good living as a designer, but only after the many years that she's been her own dressmaker. In the modern world (and I'm not saying that Pauline is not a part of that anymore than I), but in the modern world of kids farmed out onto an industry in order to sing the songs required must be able to sketch in order to tell their bosses and their associates what it is that they have in mind, and in order to translate what they are fumbling to tell. When somebody says to a kid designer, "I want you to make a great big circular skirt, and over that a very short box jacket," you can't do that..You shouldn't have to go to the muslin at once. The first thing you should be able to do is take out a piece of paper and pencil and say, "you mean this?" And the guy says, "Yeah, kind of. With the skirt a little shorter." And then you say, "You mean this?" and you sketch it, and it saves..It is the shorthand of designing. Without that you haven't got any craft. After that you should be able to drape. You should get away from the nonsense of the early American wholesale business in which everything was done on the flat. Of the elderly gentleman who clutched onto paper patterns as if their loss would be equivalent of the theft of the Torah
in their local synagogue. Because all they knew was that poor little piece of paper, which in the menswear business was called the "sloper" I think. Instead of knowing that that piece of paper was developed from a piece of muslin and/or canvas that came from a dummy, they always ended up not knowing that part of the craft, so they end up hanging onto pieces of paper and not understanding the tri-dimensions needed; not understanding the balance needed. So, draping is vitally important, and in order to be able to drape you've got to be able to cut and after that you've got to be able to put it on paper and make a first pattern, and then you should be able to sew it.

Q: That's all been very true in the menswear industry. It has not been true...

A: In the women's wear business too.

Q: Really?

A: Of course. How else?

Q: It seems to me I know a lot of designers who don't know how to do...

A: I'm very sorry to hear that. It means they're not designers.

So far as I'm concerned they cannot make a living in the open field of design in America. They can be very famous and they can end up having Coty awards. They can end up doing all sorts of things that make them many, many millions, but they're not part of the craft. I think they are as unqualified to do it, as far as I'm concerned, no matter what the results are, as television actors who've never read a piece of Shakespeare. There is only one Holy Grail in the craft, and that's the craft. If you want to design furniture, learn how to
Q: So what you're saying, essentially, is if you're a student of design you'd better know how to do all these things.

A: If you're a student of design you'd better remind yourself of the following piece of equipment...(said he, walking across the room and putting down in front of him that which is the heart and soul of this business.) There it is. Everything else is nonsense.

Q: Scissors and fabric.
A: Shears.
A: That's what it is. Everything else is nonsense. And a pencil and paper. I'm very stiff necked about that, because...

Q: But I think it's interesting, because that's a very good exposition of what design is all about.

A: I don't know many designers who don't know how to sketch right now are successful.

Q: I think most of the designers that I know, whose techniques I'm familiar with, do sketch.

A: Sure. Blass does. Well, a pattern is only a piece taken off a dummy, laid down flat and cut out. It's the same thing. It's only cloth turned into paper. But if you want to duplicate it it's the only way you can do it. You can use the cloth over and over again.

Q: Later on I'm going to ask you to discuss the difference between designing menswear and womenswear. But I'd like to get back a little bit to your own story now.

So there you were at "Molyneux." When did you leave Molyneux?
A: Hell, I was not at Molyneux; I was an apprentice.

Q: You were an apprentice, an assistant, at Molyneux. For a brief period of time.

A: September 3, 1939, Britain and Poland and France went to war with Germany, and I found myself a German refugee in the middle of Berlin with a German passport.

Q: You went back...

A: Excuse me. In the middle of London. With a German passport. With the natural result that four months later I was locked up, which is only fair. They didn't know who I was.

Q: You were locked up in London.

A: Sure. Actually I was sent to a small, very nice internment camp near Liverpool. I stayed there only a few months. No, as a matter of fact; a few weeks. My parents somehow managed, from Germany or from Brussels or wherever they were at the time...I forget. Maybe London even, at the time, they traveled so much...to get me out of this. And thence I set out to get to America. A long saga, because in those days the quota-visa system existed and each country had only so many visas to offer and Germany had a very small amount, I think 40,000, at a time when there were hundreds of thousands of Germans trying to get out of Germany.

Q: Did your travels bring you to Shanghai in some way?

A: Very much so. I had the time of my life there. I traveled from Britain to Japan, where I made my first great friends, in Japan. From Japan to Shanghai...

Q: This is in '39?
A: '40.
Q: '40. Right.

A: Between December '39...Most of '40. I lived in Shanghai for close to a year and had a glorious time. My father managed to get to me at the Chase bank in Shanghai enough money so that I could draw $75 a week, which translated into $1,500 Shanghai dollars a week. So at $1,500 a week, when you're a very young fellow, you can live very nicely. And I spent a year in absolute oblivion to the fact that things were going terribly wrong in Europe, living in total comfort. Only two miles from me there were German Jewish refugees living in squalor, in a place called "Hong Qu," which was a Japanese possession. Hong Kew is spelled "H-o-n-g K-e-w." And Michael Blumenthal, the great Secretary of the Treasury of the United States lived as a little boy--he is somewhat younger than I--in Hong Kew, in a ghettoized situation, when we lived really a frothy, funny life. Then one day my visa appeared.

Q: Did you work while you were there?
A: No. Nobody could work. My visa appeared in Shanghai, through a boy John Stuart Service who was the American Vice Consul in Shanghai, and who later on became the bete noir of the McCarthy time.

Q: Would you spell "Service."
A: S-e-r-v-i-c-e. It became a very famous name during the McCarthy years when McCarthy decided that this was one of the men who had lost us China--as if we had ever owned China! I don't remember owning China, as the United States.

Anyway, I went off to the United States. I landed on the West
Coast. I stopped off in Japan once more on the way back. It stands me in good stead today, because...since I was the first American designer to know Japan, I think I was the first one to start a business there, and it's most healthy to have known it that long--43 years. And then in the United States I tried desperately to get a job. I went straight to New York from Los Angeles, desperate to get a designing job and I couldn't. I did everything else. I did short wave broadcasting in German for NBC. Bobby Sarnoff today still giggles because he was there when I was there. And Bert Parks did the Camel Caravan and I was doing it in German, in a booth on the same stage, so when Bert sees me he still talks about the Camel Caravan in German, with Xavier Cugat. You try and pronounce Xavier Cugat in German! And then along came the war. In America! In 1941, December.

Q: And you were 17 or 18 years old.

A: In '41 I was 19 years old. I was inducted into the army and very fortunately, after a very short and interesting time in the infantry was ...became part of the Intelligence Services, and spent the war in that; went from Private to Captain, came back in 1946, in January. And very shortly thereafter I came to the attention of one Dorothy Shaver, who was interested in young American designers. And I was a young adopted American designer. I was as American as the army had made me; I was naturalized during the war. I still had a German passport when I got into the army. And then Miss Shaver encouraged me, through one of her associates, a merchandiser called Jack Bain and a whole series of bright people like Harry Rodman, who was their advertising director and through Rea Lubars, who was their public relations director, to go about the business of designing modern day clothes, untied to Paris; unfettered by what
was going on in Europe. And I guess in those days I was the first man to
do special shirts for women; to do blue jeans for women; to do car coats for women;
to do berumda shorts and chino with pink satin, buttoned down shirts. We had free-
dom, there were a bunch of us. Our seniors were people like Claire McCardell
and Bonnie Cashin and Clare Potter. My contemporaries were Fogarty and
Donald Brooks, and we had I think a fairly constructive group of young
people who were doing what they pleased without having a travel to Paris to
worship at the shrine twice a year because we couldn't have cared less.
We were the subject of zero attention on the part of the press. Neither
Vogue not Harper's Bazaar cared a damn about what we were doing. A few
of the little magazines in those days, like, for instance, Seventeen,
Glamour and Mademoiselle, paid attention to us. People like Betty Dorso,
Betty Downey, really cared. Just the other day I came across a spread that
Betty had edited of ten young designers, and there are very few survivors among
them. But by God she got them early. And the other one who made the differ-
ence in our lives was one Sally Kirkland of Life Magazine, who had the
power and the glory to do so. She had the greatest clout and the greatest
medium and she picked young people and said, "Go," and eventually Eleanor
Lambert loaned part of the Coty process to young designers and helped. And
a few stores...My, a very few stores...At Saks Fifth Avenue not one American
designer was shown except for the lady who was married to the boss. So that
was that. It was a shut out for us; we couldn't go anywhere. At Bergdorf
Goodman it was zip, except for the house designers. At Bonwit Teller they
reluctantly worked themselves, finally, into a position when Mr. Hoving ran
the store and when Walter Dieches was merchandiser manager of working with a
very few American designers, mainly Anne Klein, whom they kind of invented.

But I must tell you that the New York stores were most uncooperative, most unhelpful, and couldn't have cared less about the things we were doing. They talked about us as if we were cheap little sportswear designers, which we were. The only difference was that we were doing new clothes, and that the other clothes were coming out of Paris, either copied by discounting stores like Ohrbach's, whose job it was to see to it that a dame could buy a Balenciaga coat for $100, or whatever it cost, or import it in order to bring the Holy Grail to the American woman. There were dozens of manufacturing companies up and down Seventh Avenue whose entire task it was to see to it that Miss Rosenberg, the designer in the back room, who was the finest copyist in the world, could put together, I don't know--a Chanel, a Dior, a this or a that--better than Chanel and Dior did. And at that point of the game I think the couture houses found themselves in an unhappy position, because eventually the American wholesaler was considered to be somewhat of a damned nuisance, still, first of all because they copied but second of all because they really weren't the kind of thing that one wanted and they showed them later and they "posted caution" so you made them pay money out front; not much but enough to make it worth a damn. And then the dresses went away. You see, in a couture house one of the most glorious things in the world is to make a dress and not to have any fitting. When you've made a great evening dress for a lady, you had to keep enough fabric so that if the poor biddy spilled something on herself, or some waiter emptied a carafe of wine on her, you could replace it. Or if she got fatter or if she got thinner, you lived with that damn dress forever. Not so with wholesalers. They bought it and it went away.
somewhere; you never saw it again and all your profit was profit and wasn't that nice?

Well, along came the American press. Can you imagine, when you're a couturier who knows that on the one hand he has tough clients to cater to, but on the other hand there are people who are willing to spend all night photographing clothes in order to return the samples during the morning. That really makes you feel important, loved and wanted doesn't it? At that time, I guess, a great many American designers asked themselves how come there are people willing to make fools of themselves crossing the ocean to and fro to work all night in order to either photograph, portray or buy clothes to be copied (in bond) later on, when they can't get their ding dong feet moving ten blocks to see an American designer's true new work. That, I guess, was a question asked by many of us. Probably the most creative of all the designers at that time, probably the one who meant the most for the future and the one who ended up in the greatest shambles as...eventually as a name, was Rudy Gernreich. Because Rudy was probably the most talented man I knew. He was the one who was unfettered and untied by the sort of social strictures I had, in that I'd always lived the chi chi life, all my life.

I've seen people from the Palace at St. Moritz to the great parties in Berlin, I've seen them from the Connaught in London to the then St. Regis in New York, and I knew that one didn't do certain things. Rudy didn't feel that way at all. He knew it really didn't matter if one did or didn't do these things. All that mattered was tomorrow and Rudy understood that. And he designed glorious clothes and he introduced to the world knit T-shirt dresses and an unending variety of things that are modern, that are today, that mean now, not then. I
think that the neglect, the disregard, the disrespect, the third-ratedness that was handed to the American designer at that time probably ended up doing the greatest harm to our most creative man, and that was Rudy Gernreich. People like me develop iron skins. We no longer cared that if you opened Vogue or Harper's Bazaar you could see pages and pages of Balenciaga and Dior, and this and that in large letters. Then finally, at the end, they would pay approbation to one Norman Norell, who was brilliant, and then piddling down at the end, in small letters, was Rudy Gernreich this or that. Later on that changed, and the person who probably made it change most was Sally Kirkland, because Sally had more muscle on a spare afternoon, as a publication, (Life Magazine) than the two fashion magazines had in all of their months. Sally could do it and she did it. She would take kids like Gernreich and me and Fogarty and make us look good, and make us look like we were creative, wonderful new particles of the fashion world. So if I really think, in retrospect, from my point of view most personally, between Miss Shaver--her staff, her executives, her buying people--and Sally Kirkland at Life, Eugenia Sheppard, who cared if we were alive or dead. Editors now long gone like Connie Woodruff, who really was interested also in making these little people into interesting little stars. The fact is that there were very few people who were a help. On the great magazines were a few great gals. Kathy McManus--now Kathy de Montezemelo,-a young sportswriter called Grace Mirabella, trying her damndest; occasionally a wink of attention from Mrs. Vreeland, and Mrs. Vreeland was not the editor-in-chief of Harper's Bazaar, at that time. It was another lady who was working over her, who was more concerned with Paris than she was with anything else. I must tell you that the amount of careless mangling of American
designers during these years was fearful; the amount of...the lack of support on the part of the stores...with the exception of...I can give you names. Along with Lord & Taylor came people like J.W. Robinsons in Los Angeles, while Bulloch's didn't give a damn, nor Magnin's.

Q: What about Neiman's? Were they...

A: Neiman's...Much later. Believe me, Neiman Marcus was Paris happy for years. You know, there was Christian Dior getting the Neiman Marcus award without even knowing quite where Dallas was! He knew it was somewhere "out there," where the cowboys were, he thought. He had no idea. But, there was a degree of pushery and snobbery and small timedness that really mangled American designers at that time. I admit that, from my point of view, I did okay, eventually. But if I had not had help at that...

Q: You did make a transition didn't you? I mean, you really...

A: My transition was made in 1964, fed up to the gills...You know how it came about? I don't think anyone's ever heard this story. We had just formed something called the Council of Fashion Designers of America. This was 1963 or something like that, and I guess I was one of its 12 or 14 or 16 original members. One night, we discussed at great length at the office of the lawyers in the Seagram building, the newly opened Seagram building, what to do. And so I said, "Gee, what I think we ought to do is to select from each one of us part of the collection, hire about 15 of the prettiest women in America, hire a jet plane from Pan Am (because the jet had just started) and fly to Paris, London, Rome, and maybe even a place called Tokyo, and just show American clothes." And you know, the only response was, "Well, you know, it would be very insulting to them. I don't know how they'd take to that. I mean, what good would it do? Could we sell them there? After all."
And I said, "It doesn't matter. The important thing is to show what we do." I at that time had had many visits from the British press who said, "Gee, this is a new way of doing clothes." In those days there were young editors in England like Joe Butterfield, Barbara Briggs, who started to come to this country and see American fashions. There was a French woman called Nathalie Cervant, who worked for le Monde at the time, who used to come here from time to time and see clothes; Ernestine Carter of the Times of London, who was an American (she recently died), who would come here. So I felt that we could get interest and attention. Interest and attention. It was turned down. At that moment; at that second, (this was on a December day), I walked to the phone, called Mel Dawley who was then President of Lord & Taylor, and said, "Mel, how would you like to have a menswear design boutique, The kind that I could put together?" He said, "Gee, you're probably the only guy who could pull this off. Yes, let's talk about that." Within six months time I had switched mentally from women's American fashion to men's American fashion because I was so fed up with the blank wall I had run into. Now, maybe the others didn't feel that way, but I did. I knew where I wanted to go; I knew that I had a licensing company. I wasn't employed by a manufacturer. I knew that I had to expand the business of being the first licensing designer in America. I wasn't associated with a manufacturing company...

Q: Yes. You haven't mentioned the licensing company. I'd like to hear that story...

A: Well, here I was, after Miss Shaver got through with me, or after I got through with Lord & Taylor...
Q: When was that?

A: I guess in the '50s. I said to Lord & Taylor, "Do you mind if I also make deals, individually, with the manufacturers you appoint. They'll pay me, you won't. They never did anyway. Lord & Taylor never paid me. What happened was that I got paid by the manufacturers with whom I had deals, and off we went into the menswear business in 1963.

Q: I'm sorry. Before that you had been doing women's things on a licensing basis, for some of the manufacturing....

A: no, no. The difference between licensing and free lancing is that a licensed designer appoints a manufacturer to make his clothes, and a free lancer is a designer who works for a manufacturer. I quickly avoided ever working for a manufacturer. I worked from beginning to end for one fellow and his initials are J.W., and the manufacturers who work with us do not have me in their employ. What they have is the right to make my things. They are John Weitz manufacturers, no matter how big, how wonderful, how grand. And that is the way I have always felt and that is the way I still feel.

End of Side 1
Q: ...Now, let's hear all about the menswear. How you got started in it, how it...How your trips to Japan worked out, and so on.

A: Well, you must understand that the joy of designing men's wear, for me, was that I had worn the darned stuff all of my life, and that having been brought up in the time men's clothes were of some importance and since my father was somewhat of a fashion plate, and living in a country in which clothes were important--namely, Great Britain--it was a very natural thing for me. Also, somehow the image of me suited the idea of the men's fashion designer with great ease. Somehow I had credibility.

Q: You were the first men's wear designer who looked like....

A: Well, there were no other menswear designers. I was it. If some of the people who design men's clothes today, including Yves St. Laurent, had been launched onto the public at that time as men's clothes designers, it would have been the end right then and there because they would have, through a lack of personal credibility, quickly destroyed the very purpose, which was to get men to take another look at the clothes they were wearing and possibly to consider some other options.

Q: Are you at all familiar with how the menswear industry at that time was conducted?

A: The menswear industry at that time was conducted very much like an old women's coat and suit business. It took itself terribly seriously, as a very sound and solid operation. Dull, dull clothes pumped out and tens of thousands of sizes.

Q: And classified depending on the type of quality...

A: Quality, yes. They had six different rankings of clothing;
number one through number six clothing, which was supposed to point out how many hand operations there were in a ready-to-wear suit. They had a few brands that were highly recognizable and became forceful symbols for the businessman, such as Hickey Freeman, Botany... There were some other brands that were personified by stores, such as Brooks Brothers. One went to Brooks Brothers and you wore a Brooks suit. By the way, nothing has changed. The same customer is still going to Brooks Brothers, wearing Brooks suits, and Brooks is successful as ever. They have changed nothing and they don't have to worry about people like me at all. They're doing dandy. And what's more, at Brooks Brothers you can get values that are better than any of the department store values and better than the discounted values. They are extraordinary.

Anyway...

Q: They are exceptional?

A: They are exceptional. What happened is that the American businessman... First of all, don't forget, the American at that time was wearing off-the-peg stuff; the Europeans were not. In 1962-3-4, an American executive then making--what? $30-40,000 a year, which was big money; that was a Chairman's job. Darn it, a department store head got paid $45,000 a year in those days. He went and bought ready clothes, off the peg. I don't care what the name was on them--Hickey Freeman, I guess, was the favorite brand. His equivalent number in England, France, Germany, was not wearing off-the-peg clothes; he was going to his tailor and going through the agonies of waiting for the ding dong thing to be finished. So the American very quickly accustomed himself to the idea of wearing "store boughten" clothes. No matter what you thought of it, that's what they were--"store boughten" clothes! And all that they could
have as a point of assurance was the label inside. They also formed... At that time they had a strong alliance with the salesman in the store. The salesman, far from being the striped pants, black jacketed clerk of the British establishment, was friend, aide, guide and doctor, who would call them up and say, "Al, I've got something for you." Or, in a few cases, "Mr. Miller, I've got your wardrobe together for this winter. When do you think you can come in and try it on?" And poor Mr. Miller would be put through the two-minute misery, occasionally with his wife standing by... His wife would say things like, "We don't look good in brown," you see. Some would, like the nurse in the hospital, say, "Have we had our dinner?" Or, the usual sort of avuncular attitude for the poor husband (it's hard for a woman to be avuncular) standing there being outfitted. That was the American menswear business at the time.

Q: Part of that business...

A: Was the designer. Now, the designer in the menswear business was the fellow who, in the women's wear business, was known as the patternmaker. And truthfully the menswear designer was the designer, because he designed the paper out of which wholesale, ready-to-wear suits were made. That does not mean that he designed the clothes or that he pretended to be anything but what he was. Of course, the advent of a fellow like me, who within six months ended up with bags of publicity and huge stories, infuriated them so I incurred at first a great wrath of the menswear "designers," who were then the technicians within each major company. I do remember trying very hard at that time to really design new clothes in that I did the jacket, for instance, in a completely unlined, unpadded way; pockets slashed where you could reach them; no darts,
none of the canvas that used to be inside menswear, so that the suit was a
new construction, weighing practically nothing...

Q: Totally new...

A: It didn't look quite as different as it might have from
other clothing, in the same way as... My pants at that time, for the first
time, hung on the hips in a contoured way, like cowboy pants rather than
the way men's pants had been cut until then, which was very loose, very high,
to be worn on suspenders or gaiters, which is the way that men wore their
pants then.

I obviously incurred at first a great disdain of the menswear
industry, such that they said to themselves, "Well, it's a small setup." And
I had a very distinguished manufacturer who was making John Lloyd suits at
the time, called Lebow Brothers, and, "Maybe a small setup like that may work
very well." We opened the first 13 or 14 John Weitz clubs... I avoided at all
cost calling them John Weitz boutiques. The first one was at Lord & Taylor
and we had them all over the country. Today I think some other designers call
them clubs. It is a nicer way of saying to a man, "Come on in and try it."
The first personal appearance tour was a semi-disaster because what happened
was that in every town where I made a personal appearance, every hairdresser
in town descended, and what I wanted were the nice business executives who
were petrified and they stayed away in droves. But, every eccentric in the
town would descend on it and say, "Well, this isn't colorful enough for us." They had visions of sugar plums and pink suits and I don't know what. So,
when I turned up with my completely redesigned, generally acceptable business
suit, that put them into a great quandary.

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Nevertheless, in no time at all I managed to attract five or six licensees, each one of whom was a specialist in his field.

Q: And these were all American manufacturers.

A: All American manufacturers.

Q: Manufacturing here.

A: Oh, absolutely. Who started to market the things. I then had to fight the stores to get rid of the clubs I had formed, because what would happen is that John Weitz shirts could only be bought in the John Weitz clubs. That was the last thing I wanted. I wanted my shirts to be in the shirt department. So the very thing that I had started a couple of years before I then ended up begging them to discontinue because I said, "Okay, the people in San Francisco know John Weitz; the people in Cleveland know John Weitz. Now do me a favor: Get rid of that stupid little corner in which you've got me crammed and put the merchandise where it belongs, namely into its natural department." The man who walks in to buy a shirt isn't going to go to a John Weitz shop. First he goes to the shirt department. If my shirts can then compete I want to be there. If they can't compete then I shouldn't be in this business. That was it. So off we went. Each piece was designed though for a certain purpose. For instance, at that time I was designing men's business shirts, which were dual purpose; they could be worn as sports shirts and business shirts. They had square tails so you could wear them outside the pair of pants if you went on a business trip. They were new patterns, interesting patterns. Checkboards, hounds tooth, gingham, which normally hadn't been worn by men.

Q: John, where were you doing your designing?

A: Oh, I had my own studios on 40th Street and I kept my own
little design staff.

Q: When did you take that on?
A: Oh...I had had my own office since 1956 when I started my business. I always hired my own people. I always ran my own...

Q: When you were still doing women's things.
A: Sure. I had studios at 1407 Broadway for a long time. Then I had studios at 110 West 40th Street for a long time. Then I moved to 40 W. 55th Street, the first menswear designer to get away from that hallowed area and start on 55th Street. Today that is largely a menswear building. I read the other day in the Times that Ralph Lauren said he moved there because I was there. Fine. I'm delighted. It's a very important building for him now. Then I moved from there to here, at 600 Madison.

Q: But at this point, do you have a studio here too?
A: I don't anymore, at this point of the game. There's no need was there to do? I can work with each one of my manufacturers; they have their own design rooms. Absolutely.

Q: But in those days you did indeed...
A: Oh, sure. And in those days I made my first samples. Everything. Gosh yes. We ended up...

Q: Did you have an Assistant Designer or...
A: Yeah. Sure. We had assistants who worked with me on piece by piece...I'd cut the muslin and say, "Okay, go ahead and see that it gets finished and sewn." And it was a very amusing time. They didn't quite understand...

Q: Did you select your own fabrics?
A: Oh, sure. But the fact is that, there again, you know, as always, in design, it isn't quite the way you mean. The really new things I did were never understood. Basically people are not willing to accept news. They are willing to accept that which they understand. People understand styling a lot more than they understand designing. The difference to me is that if you take a man's blue buttoned down shirt and put it into pink silk satin and say to a woman, "Wouldn't that be amusing as the top of an evening dress?" And below that you do a pink silk skirt, and then in the middle a great snakeskin belt, that's styling; it really isn't designing. What you're doing is you're taking something and making it look different. And a great many people today delude themselves by thinking that styling is designing. The fact that somebody knows how to pick a British tweed and how to put it with a striped English type shirt and a paisley tie and a bright yellow foulard handkerchief doesn't mean that that's design. That's styling. And it's cute; it's nice. It's the ability of anyone with good taste (and sometimes with eccentric taste) to make you pay attention. But designing is very rare and very few and far between. Chanel designed. At the time she did her clothes, nobody else was doing what Chanel was doing. She was the first one to accustom women to the idea of these men's adopted suits that she was producing for them. They said, "Are you mad? We can't wear a man's jacket!" "Says who?" said Chanel. "What do you mean, pockets in skirts? Who needs a pocket in a skirt?" "Where are you going to put your hands?" "What do I need to put my hands there for?" "That's how women are going to stand and walk." That's designing. Styling is something so easy and so funny and so nice that any window dresser can really do it.

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Q: Tell us about Europe.

A: There is nothing to tell. I had, in the '60s, some 16 boutiques in Europe, but there is, in the words of Gertrude Stein, when it comes to merchandising, "no there, there." Europe is not a merchandising area. It's not a consumer area. It is a multi-fragmented, multi-currency, multi-lingual, multi-attitudinal, non-television, non-mass communications area in which it is very, very difficult to produce the kind of depth of volume required to satisfy an American designer or to find a central licensee who can, in the manner of America or Japan, handle this throughout Europe. Everyone who goes to Europe as an American designer will end up either in disappointment or satisfying only his vanity. There ain't nothin' there!

Q: But were these 16 boutiques...Did you set up with a partner?

A: Oh, we had a whole group of European manufacturers.

Q: I see.

A: Who made a deal with us.

Q: Because you haven't made any reference to them before.

A: Oh, there are a whole series of manufacturers: Some Swedes; some English companies, all of whom got together as a large team. But when you end up selling as much in all of Vienna in a year as you sell in Cleveland, Ohio in a spare afternoon, you find out that it really isn't worth the trouble. It's terribly good for the vanity. The Europeans were most generous to me. They adored, apparently, me and certainly the things that I was doing. But from a business standpoint it was pure, pure destruction.

Q: So you dropped it after how long?

A: Oh, God. After four years. We had 13 years of association in Great Britain. That is one country that is almost like America in its nature.
We had 13 years with Austin Reed's and various other organizations in England. But the general European business is one that I wouldn't diddle with for the world, unless it had changed enormously. There are probably a few groups in Europe that are worthwhile, like C&A, who are a group of stores all over Europe. As you know, they are part of the Ohrbach...But that is literally...

End of Tape 1
Q: ...for the Oral History Collection of the Fashion Institute of Technology, this will be a second interview with John Weitz. The interview takes place on October 6, 1983; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Why don't we start right in with your telling us about how you entered the world of licensing in Japan--the year, the circumstances, and so on.

A: I entered licensing in Japan long after I had attempted the same thing in Europe. In 19...let me see...'78. I had been visited by various and sundry Japanese organizations....

Q: I'm sorry; you don't mean 1978...

A: Excuse me; '68. '68, of course. I had been visited by various Japanese organizations who felt some interest in my work and the terms never seemed right. Finally I was visited by a big petrochemical company called Teijin. They also were in the fibre business and I could see some sense to their handling the license in the same way that DuPont, Celanese, Trevira or Hoechst would be good people to license a designer in their countries, since they do have control of many things and if they're benevolent they won't insist on the use of their fabrics only. Which, in the case of Teijin, was so. They simply said, "Well, if a tie has to be silk, it's silk. But if we can convince some people into using some polyester in suits, then so be it."

They and we signed a license agreement, and shortly thereafter they gave the license to (they didn't sell it; they still hold it) a group of department stores called Daimaru. Daimaru department stores are a close to 300 hundred year old Japanese department store group who have done the most distinguished job of using the name. Of necessity, what they have not
done is what what certain French designer names have in Japan, which is that the French have countrywide distribution whereas we are tied in some way to Daimaru's own stores or to those stores with whom they have close associations.

Q: Now this was in what year?

Q: Didn't you start to license earlier in Japan?
A: No. Nobody did. There was not a single American there at the time that I arrived. The French were there, the Italians weren't. The English weren't, and I think 1967-'68 was the advent of other than the French names. So I was certainly the first American there, I know, and I guess today we are the ones best known. The Japanese can do things that you cannot do successfully in America because the money isn't there. The Japanese can promote a face and a name on television until that face becomes pop culture. Today, without bragging, I can walk into any small Japanese town and people will say, "Oh, it's John Weitz!" and they treat me as kind of a cross between a James Bond figure and a wrestler and...I've become part of the folklore at this point of the game, I guess, in Japan, and they giggle about me. Because the name in Japan, on the television commercials, is pronounced in a peculiar way. It's a very deep voice which says, "J-o-h-n W-e-i-t-z." And so wherever I go in Japan, even at hotel desks occasionally the clerk will say, "Ah, Mr. J-o-h-n W-e-i-t-z." It has been most joyous. In Japan one is faced with the business of dealing with a seemingly similar culture but actually very dissimilar set of attitudes, with a seemingly similar culture. It is actually quite dissimilar. The Japanese department store, for instance, does not for the most
part buy any merchandise. It is simply a platform the way that American cosmetics departments and fragrance departments are, for merchandise which is put into that store or put onto that platform by the manufacturers.

Q: I knew that was true of women's wear; it's also true of...?
A: Every field of Japanese retailing. And the Japanese retailer, traditionally, will complain that he hasn't got enough merchandise to sell. "How can I do business," he will say, "when we don't have enough sizes, enough colors, etc.?" Whereas in America the complaint is on the part of the manufacturer. "How can they (meaning the stores) do business if they haven't got enough sizes, colors, etc.?" So it is a different ballgame. You know that you are to some degree in the hands of the manufacturers whom they appoint, and of the financial potency and the will to invest on the part of the manufacturer. The manufacturer, in Japanese terms... It's a terrible term; they call them the "contractor." The contractor is really the heart and soul of it all. If you have a big contractor in neckties, then millions of stores carry your neckties. If you don't have a big contractor in neckties, only the stores you're working with carry your neckties.

Q: Now, then. Is Teijin still the...?
A: Teijin still holds the license; the Daimaru department store group still holds the sublicense. In September of 1984, meaning this upcoming September, we have a huge event celebrating 15 years of John Weitz in Japan, mainly based on an event that features Manhattan. Because I was the first Manhattan designer to arrive and to talk about the Manhattan look and thousands of commercials about me invariably have either a touch of Manhattan or the Manhattan skyline or something about New York in the background. I have for years been giving gifts in Japan which have to do with New York. My last
was a wooden apple sculpture on a silver base inscribed for each executive whom we deal with. and they are very fond of New York. I just gave 70, I think it is, books of Peter Finks' famous Manhattan skylines, which are featured at F.I.T., to the Japanese, personally inscribed. Which was grand, except somewhat of a chore for poor Peter, who had never inscribed, "Yocho Kachimoto," and who ended up in tears after three hours of inscribing.

Q: When you first went over there, how did you look at them in terms of designing itself?

A: I was a lucky fellow. I had been to Japan long ago, and I had a pretty fair idea. The important thing in Japan is to be definitive. They want definitions. They are willing to accept any definitions. If that definition turns out to be correct, you are forever their man. If your definition turns out to be incorrect, you are through as a designer.

Q: I think you might explain how you are using "definition."

A: Definition means "we do not believe in double breasted, we only do single breasted." "We believe that the future consists of no padding in the shoulders. The lapels will be 5 cm wide." "Neckties are going to this year be 3 cm wide." Etc., etc. You simply definitively say that which you feel is right, and then you turn out to be right or wrong. The Japanese have no intention of playing fashion maven. Western fashion to them is simply an instrument through which they belong to the Western world. They have their own world which consists of Japanese clothes and decor, and you cannot fool with them. I cannot tell a Japanese what is or is not a good kimono print. Or what is or is not a good print for a pillow. That they know. But when it comes to Western things, I can say, "Don't do this, do that." They'll still do
as they please. There is not a single Japanese executive limousine you
get into—whether it's the most modern 500 Mercedes or a Cadillac Seville
—that hasn't got a white, doily like cover over the seats.

Q: Are they protecting...?

A: Oh, the reasons are whatever they are; it really doesn't
matter. Because they have been all over the world and they've seen those
same cars driven by corporate chairmen without doilies. It just happens to
to be a Japanese way of doing things. And nothing you can do can dissuade
them. This is the way it's done in Japan, and they're not going to alter
that.

Q: And the business of making decisions by consensus, of course,
pertains just as much here, I assume, as anywhere else.

A: Entirely different in Japan. The decision is made...

Q: I mean in Japan, it's strictly by consensus. The committee
must agree.

A: Well, there's not a committee disagreement. It's simply making
a decision and then making sure that everybody is asked to condone that de-
cision, sometimes by the twist of an arm. There are very, very few Japanese
executives who will openly voice an objection to a corporate plan. It is not
in their nature. They may voice gentle questions and hope the thing falls on
its face so that they look clever later. Or, conversely, they may hope it
works and that they haven't made too wild an objection. It's so different
that it would take another hour and half to begin to talk about the Japanese
mind. Fortunately, I had the great good fortune of writing a chapter on Japan
in a book I did called "Man in Charge." That chapter made such an impression
in Japan that they've reprinted the book in Japanese and published it there, and a great number of Japanese executives, for the first time, got to know what it is that an American might feel about them. All the pitfalls that I pointed out to Americans reading my book. I find myself, when I'm in Japan....Now, many people say, "I never understood American businessmen and what they worried about until I read your book."

Q: Well, now, after...You had signed the contract with Teijin and Daimaru became the vehicle through the merchandise marketed.

A: Yes. Well, then, more and more products were developed by then. At Daimaru they would call us once every three months and say, "Do you mind if we have John Weitz towels?" Not at all. "Do you mind if we have John Weitz kimonos?" Not at all. Slippers, which are very important in Japan as well, as you know, since they are normal stuff the moment you take off your shoes.

And so year by year I went to Japan and did not stay in Tokyo of Osaka. I went from Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe far into the country, doing as many as 25 or 30 towns each time, getting to know a lot more about the nooks, crannies and corners in which there are Japanese cities of a million people that nobody know about. You know...Who knows a town called Kochi on the island of Skopu?

Q: How do you spell it?

A: K-o-c-h-i. It is one of the biggest fishing ports in the world. It is the whaling capital of the world, by the way. It's not the place to be when you want to save the whales. It has vast hotels, huge wealth, great restaurants. The town of Fukwokà, which is a port on the island of Kyushu.
The town of Hiroshima...Well, when I heard that I had to go to Hiroshima, I was aghast. I resisted it for a long time and finally, after five years in Japan, I went off to Hiroshima on a personal appearance trip to two department stores. And I thought, "Oh, what a shame." But I did it and I found that Hiroshima is much more involved with a motor car company called Mazda, which was the huge factory opposite my hotel, and that the only thing that the hotel worried about was if I understood that that night the bands...I don't know...Fetikyono and his Bobcats was going to perform. It's a modern town which has its terrible history. I went to see the museum as part of the day and my own way of attempting to pay penance. I did a lengthy interview with the press, who asked me if I thought America would ever do this again; if America was right in so doing. I finally lost my cool and said to them that the widows of Pearl Harbor are as unhappy as the widows of Hiroshima, and, "May I point out that Pearl Harbor was December 7, 1941 and Hiroshima was several years later." So that finished the conversation. The Japanese have a great way of accepting a blunt statement without getting upset, provided the blunt statements come from foreigners.

Q: Right. How many times have you gone to Japan for your licensing?

A: Oh, I guess some 25 times, just for the business part, at least.

Q: So that's almost twice a year for...

A: Yes. Very often twice a year; sometimes once a year. And if I don't go my associates go...I'm there once a year anyway, and my associates are there at least once a year besides me.
Q: Working with the contractors or with the stores....

A: With the stores mainly. And the contractors. But 8/10 of the work is with the stores. Japanese stores occasionally fall into the hands of American consultants. One of our great store groups recently fell into the hands of a consultant who said to them, "The day of displaying of brand names is over." And the big store suddenly found themselves without a single display, so that you'd walk into a shoe department and see 250 pair of shoes beautifully displayed, but you didn't know which were the Dior shoes and which were the Jourdan shoes and which were the this; and, of course, it was a disaster. So I howled and screamed and they changed it back and the American consultants went back, having collected their fee and licked their chops, or wounds, as the case may be.

Q: Now. How do you differentiate...Or, what are the differences between licensing over there and licensing here, as far as you're concerned?

A: Because Japan is a country of major organizations, and a country where things can be done by appealing to other organizations to cooperate, you can make longer term plans in Japan. Japan...The Japanese business organization is not profit centered. In America you can't make deals, because that poor president of a division who makes a deal with you for a major parent company, and his division is called "Cutesie Pie"; well, the president of Cutesie Pie is profit centered, and a year later when Cutesie Pie has not met the projections, the president is out on his butt. And you, having signed the license agreement with Cutesie Pie and its parent corporation, Engulf and Devour, find yourself in the position of suddenly facing a new president who is now the head of that division and who says, "God, that license agreement was signed by Irving Schmaltz who was here before me and Cutesie Pie Company is not going
to feature any designing names. It's going to copy Levi Strauss's blue jeans only, under an invented name, called 'Crash Bottom.'" And so long negotiation then takes place with the parent company to whom you say, "But you have a five year contract with us." So you can't make long term plans in America, as most department store heads have found out because the department store heads are not department store heads for long. They're only department store heads for two years and then they become something else. Anyone with three-quarter of a million dollars or a million dollars to hand out at this point of the game can get themselves a department store president, any moment, any time, anywhere. So it is hard to make long term plans in America.

Q: How about...

A: It's easy to make long term plans in Japan because... Not that the executives stay in the same place. Don't kid yourself. They play chess with each other. But at least the corporation has a sense of obligation to you and a sense of longevity. Because the decision is made corporatively, not by the people.

Q: And what about working with the designers of the company that licenses your name?

A: You carefully tell them what you want and they do exactly as they please.

Q: They don't give you things to approve?

A: Of course they do. By the time you get them to approve they've already been shipped into the stores or are on their way there. What are you to do at that point of the game? Stand on your hind legs and howl? Firstly, because you may not like the way it looks. But the important thing is that
eventually they'll prove to you that, from their point of view, their market is correct for these things. And they'll show you the figures to back them up. The only time that you can really raise hell in Japan is when they fall down and don't produce the figures.

Q: I'm not talking about Japan now. I'm talking about...
A: Oh, in this country.
Q: In this country, yes.
A: In this country you ride an incredible wave as a licensing designer of benevolent compromise. First of all, it must be realized by anyone who licenses and has a big enough business, that he does not know every industry he licenses into. It is unlikely that a talented, well known, internationally renowned designer of fashion is fully aware of the implications of the American raincoat business; of the American swimsuit business. Simply because he isn't there. Any national sales manager of a swimsuit company will know more than the designer does because he spends 24 hours a day thinking between the throat and the crotch. That's his life. Thinking what goes on between those two places. Is it going to switch into nylon? Is it going to go into spandex? Are we going to have plain cotton suits? Are we not going to have cotton suits? Will bright colors be strong? Will the bikini come back? Will the one piece maillot be good? How high will the sides be cut? He doesn't have to be very clever to know what goes on, because all day long there are buyers coming in. All day long, for right or wrong, they say to him, "I don't want to buy any more maillots." Then they guy knows, after ten people have said it, in various accents ranging from Brooklyn to Los Angeles, that he doesn't produce any maillots because they don't want to buy them. If women want maillots
or not has nothing to do with it, by the way, because department stores usually work on rumor. And the department store buyer, aged 19, 22, 23, hears from 18 other department store buyers that maillot are not selling, then that buyer goes into the market convinced of the death of the maillot swimsuit, even if there are women thirsting for it. The terrible fact of life is that people buy what they can find, not what they can't find. So if people go into a store and see 180 two piece suits and no maillots, they're going to buy two-piece suits. Even if their tummies hang out, they're going to buy two-piece suits.

So, it must be understood by a licensing designer that he doesn't know more than the specialists in each field. All that he can do is to provide from the outside, through good instinct, that which is his contribution. But it must, of necessity, be a naive contribution, because he is not sophisticated to the ways of that industry. He doesn't know. He isn't there. I wear knit ties. I love knit ties. I could tell you years in which a necktie salesman in a necktie manufacturing company couldn't sell a knit tie, because buyers said knit ties weren't selling. So I must be unique. Now, if I were to design a tie collection, of necessity, I would say, "Of course at least a third of it for fall is going to be knit." Well, until this year that wasn't true. That would have been disastrous.

So, if the designer has the arrogance to assume that he knows more about skirts than skirtmakers; about suits than suitmakers; about coats that coatmakers; about shoes than shoe manufacturers, he's going to fall on his puss, I'll guarantee it. The only way you can get away with that nonsense is a little trick being played by certain people. You take that which was

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always around--always. You overprice it and build huge amounts of publicity around it, and then what you do is you present the Emperor's clothes. What you do is you say, "I have something incredible for you. It's called blue jeans! And they are marvelous!" So what you do is you present a banality with tremendous hooplah. And people are used to banality. And if the hooplah is strong enough, they'll even pay a little more for the banality. For a tennis shirt with a doodad on it; for an L. L. Bean jacket, that you could buy out of a catalogue in America; that women have been buying out of a catalogues for the last thirty years, are now presented with great hooplah at a department store, with huge advertising. Now, that's the only way that you can get away with saying, "I know more than you do." Simply by doing something that's always been there. But the moment you wish to do something that in the least walks away from the norm, you're in bad trouble. Any designer who's tried it has fallen on his face eventually.

So, if you come to a clear understanding with your licensee about the areas of competence...as we often do. I sit down with them and I say, "Look. There are things you fellows know and there are things I know. The things I know will not make the difference between profit and loss in the situation." They will legitimize the offering: Please show them. Don't prejudice yourself against them. "I will count on you to back me up with the things which I know will work." You cannot have a men's dress shirt line without plain, light blue shirts. And in this era, you can't have it without light blue, buttoned down shirts. Ten years ago, by the way, buttoned down shirts weren't selling. I was wearing them but nobody else seemed to be, because there weren't manufacturers who were selling them. Today there are.
So you constantly end up like the outside talent saying to them, "I have a hunch that this is what's going to be and I'm going to show it to you. Here are my sketches, here are my samples." Show them. Maybe they won't sell now. It doesn't matter. Show them and say to people, "That's John Weitz's idea for next year. But I need your backing to find out how we're going to do business together."

Q: (inaudible)

A: Of course. How are you going to license men's socks without navy blue hose? It doesn't work does it?

Q: Why don't you talk about your various advertising and other sales promotional kinds of activities, because they have played a very important role in your life haven't they?

A: Well, in the first place, more and more, one comes to the reluctant and horrifying conclusion that due to the unending insecurities of American retailers, partly or mainly because the great American individual merchant owners have disappeared from the face of the earth, have sold their companies and the companies are now...The department stores are now in the hands of very nice corporate executives who have no great proprietary interest, and who have no great interest in having proprietary interest, in that if a man owned a store in Cleveland and he didn't like...or in St. Louis...And he didn't like beige polo coats, he said, "I don't want beige polo coats in my store," no matter who else carried it. Whereas today an executive who hears that the other fellow has beige polo coats, says, "Gee, I guess I ought to carry beige polo coats." There's no big boss to walk through and say, "Sam, get rid of those damn coats; I don't want them in my store." "But Mr. So-and-
So, they're selling at Stix, Baer & Fuller." "I don't give a damn where they're selling; I don't want them in my store!" These attitudes that do not exist. As a result, the American retailer, of necessity, has become a computer ridden, overly busy, not-close-to-the-floor preacher of printout rumor. And he appears, or she appears, in New York...with judgments which are not correct. It really doesn't particularly matter, in fact, because the companies will cater to those judgments. As I said before, retail customers buy what they can find, not what they can't find. And if they can't find polo coats, they won't buy them. If they can find enough of them, they will buy them. It's as simple as that.

Q: Now, could you talk about advertising and sales promotion.

A: Well, this brings me back to the thing that I was trying to say. It all keys itself, because of their insecurity, to one place. The place is called New York City. On bended knee, the world...the American retailer descends upon the Bloomingdale's, the Macy's--mainly the Bloomingdale's and the Macy's--to some degree the Saks'--to get the word; the Holy Grail. Because of my disappearance from the scene of the major New York retailer, due to the fact that they had a change in management and decided that John Weitz and they were not for each other anymore--namely Lord & Taylor--I have no such platform. Bloomingdale's and I have seen non-eye-to-eye for many years. I have many a time thought it was kind of funny that our company existed all of these years and that there seemed to be thousands of people in New York who are interested in New York, but they can't find us at Bloomingdale's. At Macy's we do have a strong bright platform, and we're getting more and more involved with that group of stores. But, in order to do a job in America,
you must do it in New York City. Therefore, our advertising is concentrated on New York City. Secondly, we are probably the first company (because of the many years that I've worked all over the world) to use media that other people haven't used. I guess I was the first designer name to use outdoor advertising. I went onto bus shelters; I went onto the backs of buses, because I had seen chic and rich outdoor advertising in Great Britain, where they've advertised some of the most expensive things in posters. So, a good part of our money goes there. We cannot rival the blue jean gang, who...I don't know...Invest $3 million in advertising and hope that they sell $28 million against it. I don't know what they base their formula on. They've done a lovely thing though. They've now trained the stores into dealers, and they simply walk into a town and say, "We're going to dump $250,000 worth of advertising here, and if you fellows don't carry the product that's too bad for you." I can't do that; we haven't got the facilities, we haven't got the cash to do it. We finance our own advertising. But at the beginning of my licensing time, I did a lot of cooperative advertising with our licensees, trying to get all the money together. But because of the nature of our business, which is that we are involved with large individual companies who have their own advertising budgets, their own advertising directors, their own advertising agencies, that has become increasingly difficult. Every time you do a collaborative thing--and we just got through with one--you end up having to convince a group of people to give away their hard-fought-for budgets into a format that is not their format. Because, of necessity, it's our format. Agencies who do not get credit for something, that get booked by our agency...there are too many problems. So most of the time we've learned to depend on each licensee for advertising. Some licensing
companies recently have been building advertising clauses into their con-
tracts. We don't, because we found them unenforceable. "You shall run
20 consumer ads." Where, how. Companies turn to us and say, "Well, we just
spent $400,000 on you." "How?" "Well, they were consumer co-op ads."
And you point out to them that those 5% were built into the contracts of
their sale, and have nothing to do with separate advertising. And then
they say, "Well, I guess that's true. We'll do something about it next year.
We'll develop a separate budget." But, frankly, the only ones we can sincerely
depend on are we ourselves. We have our own budget, we have our own money.
We attempt at all costs to intrigue two kinds of people--the opinion makers
and the business community. I'm talking about industry community in our field.
How successful we've been I don't know. I do know that at least once a year I
come up with some amusing project. I find it destructive to do fashion shows.

Q: Yes, I was going to ask you about that.

A: I think the Europeans have to. They've set up a circus that
they can't dodge. And whereas it may be glorious for us to think, "Isn't it
wonderful to be a Dior?" and to be a St. Laurent and to be a Chanel and to be
a Balenciaga and to be an Ungaro, the fact is that there are 30 top French
designers, or 22 top French designers who never get reported here. Because
the American press, for some reason or other, or the trade press has decided
that they wouldn't pay attention to them. I'd like to know how many Italian
designers are showing this very week and are ignored by the American press.

Anyway, it really doesn't matter where you show. The Italians
will never have it. There's only one place in the world that the world holds
its international medical convention in fashion, and that's in Paris. Not be-
cause the French are good or bad; simply because it's a convenient, pleasant
place to sit and get a consensus of opinion and it saves one having to make up
one's own damn mind; and it means that all American stores will eventually
look alike; that a great many American offerings will look exactly alike,
because I don't see the Europeans coming here to report, breathlessly, on
the new silhouette of Calvin Klein or the new ideas of Oscar de la Renta. And
if they did, what would it matter? Because whom would they report to? The
Europeans, who haven't got an industry or a market? What does it matter if
some German garment manufacturer knows that Calvin Klein doesn't believe in
wide or thin slacks? What's he going to do? Change his production? Into
what. He hasn't got a big market. He can't live without export. The German
market is so small it doesn't really particularly matter. It only looks big,
it really isn't.

Q: What about the kinds of shows that involve taking....having
your merchandise shown in stores and making personal appearances? That kind
of thing.

A: No. Primarily because for that I'd have to have a lot of
products in the stores. I may have 5,000 suits in the store but not a shirt,
because our shirt manufacturer hasn't got a great alliance with a store, whereas
the suit manufacturer does. If I were a smaller setup and I had a nice,
boutiquey operation, and I had a John Weitz boutique in that shop...in that
store, I could do it. Because then I'd have everything there. I'd have 30
shirts and 22 ties and 64 pair of trousers. Boy could I do fashion...

Q: Well, that's one of the major differences, isn't it, between
your operation here and the one in Japan?

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A: Yes. Well...

Q: Where you have Daimaru to distribute everything.

A: Exactly. But the fact is that it too has its drawbacks, naturally. There we have a full assortment of merchandise in each store, but we have other drawbacks in that we have to put up with weak manufacturers whom we can get rid of here in our country.

Q: And you can't get rid of them there.

A: No. They're part of the picture and there's no control. All I can do is say, "For God's sakes, will you get rid of the guy who makes our golf jackets, because he isn't selling enough and he isn't contributing enough," and so on and so forth. Whereas in our country we can eventually, with howls and screams and a great deal of blackmail, get rid of our manufacturers, if we have to. We usually don't; they're perfectly wonderful people. We have licensees we've been with for 15-16 years and couldn't be happier. Occasionally you'll run into a problem.

Q: Right. Let's go back a little bit to the chronology of this. In 1969 you started your licensing in Japan, officially; you're having your 15th anniversary.

A: Yes. In '68 we started negotiating and in '69 we opened. But we had been in Europe, don't forget, since 1965.

Q: You had done shows and you had your boutiques...

A: Oh, we had all our boutiques in Europe and we had...We were in every Austin Reed store in Great Britain and in their branches on the European continent. I had the...the English habit of calling Europe, it used to be called "the Continent." In England now they are used to talking about
"England and over in Europe," they say. So we had been through that dance and it was a useless, sweet, vanity-producing dance. Oh, my. Wasn't it nice when I showed in Milan to the entire press. And they were all so happy with this great big tall American. It was so funny. You know, in England, for many, many years made me sound like a cowboy. They'd say, "Great big, tall, lanky John Weitz said, 'Yup, I believe in that.'" And they kept ignoring the fact that I was German born and English educated to them because of the whole television-movie aspect. I looked like an American. It's the same way that Cary Grant look American to us; he's English.

Q: You know, you do raise an interesting question that I wasn't going to ask you...But what do you feel about the look of people, coming closer, despite nationality?

A: Well, what is happening, of course, is that the American has lost his face. The man. I think it's mainly junk food that has brought that nice, lean, cheek-hollowed American look that I saw when I came to this country and which I saw a lot when I got into the army, into this fat-faced, funny...They all have great bodies, but my God, what happened to the face? All these cheeks and all that hair hanging down and all those ears covered by all that arnel type kewpie doll lock and all those mustaches dangling around. Really! Americans, at this point of the game, need to look at pictures of Henry Fonda playing in "Grapes of Wrath," or say, Cooper, or Randolph Scott, and say, "Come on, let's get our cheek bones back and let's get the fat out of our faces and stop stuffing ourselves with Big Burger or Mick Mac," or whatever it is and start exercising our faces instead of just our rear ends. Americans jog a great deal and their tummies may be in shape, but somehow
their faces have gone askew. There's something that has gone wrong with the American male face recently. And with the American male hairdo.

Q: But what about the American male's clothes, vis-a-vis the clothes of his contemporaries in other countries?

A: Well, they're very similar. Germans and Americans dress much alike, although the Germans have the Italian disease. All great big, fat assed German businessmen really think that they ought to look like little Italian counts. So whenever the Italians have little unborn collars, the Germans wear the unborn collars and teeny little neckties and they wear their suits too tight sometimes. But I think they're getting over the Italian disease now.

Q: Can you tell one nationality from another, on sight?

A: Ummm...No. I can quite often tell an Englishman, I think, but he always turns out to be an Australian. Because Englishmen end up not dressing that way anymore and the Australians dress the way Englishmen used to. I can tell a European from an American, usually, by something.

Q: But not an individual country.

A: No. Usually by collar or by shoe. Those are the two places that you can tell very quickly, in that Americans...Well dressed Americans have a certain style, which is a melange of many things that came out of the early American college, Ivy League, of the '30s and it came out of the English; it came out of movie types like Cary Grant. It came out of Fred Astaire, who was really influenced by the English.

Q: And...What about...Well, I'm sorry. Let's get back to what I interrupted, which was you were about to tell what's happened since 1969
in your life, after you had really set yourself up in Japan, with licensing.

A: Well, what happened was that that business grew and my American business grew substantially. We had a forceful addition to my little company in that former, very young and bright retail senior executive joined the firm, at first as Vice President and then as President, and then became a partner of mine. And for the first time...

Q: What's his name?

A: Michael Wynn. And for the first time in lo these many years I found myself not as a lone soul making his own decisions, but bouncing ideas off somebody else and, fortunately, somebody I could respect. So if he said, "No, I think that's nonsense (and he is so tactful that he would never say it in those terms; he'd say, 'Don't you think we ought to reconsider that?')," he has brought enormous benefits to us in every possible way. I've learned that it's easier for him to negotiate than for me. I learned to concentrate on the things that I can do. I also learned that if I'm going to live a frantic life, to live it in the things I most enjoy. And to me, negotiations are not things that I most enjoy. So that has made a great deal of difference.

Don't forget that the nature of this business is that we may field as many as 15 potential conversations on business relationships each week. Fourteen may turn out to be utter nonsense, and one may turn out to be a possibility. We can tell very quickly.

Q: You don't mean new licensees. You mean...

A: Yeah. Sure. People who are interested in deals and licenses.

Q: You still continue to...

A: Oh, it goes on and on and on. People come to you. You know,
Q: How many have you got now?

A: We've got twenty-some...23 in this country. And there are some 34 or 35...I'm being vague only because of sub-licensees, in Japan. So they...Do you know that the very first question of people who come here to talk about a John Weitz license, I ask, "Why do you want it?" And the answer very often reveals utter nonsense. If they say they want it for fashion inspiration, we ask them to turn to some other designers, because our business is making money, not to inspire them. That's not my task, at the age of 61, to give fashion inspiration.

Q: On the other hand, it's the validity of your name that they want, as well, I assume.

A: Well, most of the time that's all that they want. That isn't very good either. We're hoping that there's a little more to it than that. I guess simply to feed my vanity, I would be happy if someone were to say, "Oh, and if you have any ideas we'd be more than grateful." At that point of the game I usually smirk a little and say, "Yes, I'll try," or something of the sort, equally constructive.

Q: Do you have any idea about a subject like offshore production. I know that you, yourself, are not involved...

A: I frankly cannot begin to tell you how little that interests me. With Alvin Toffler, I believe that the industrial era in America is over. Just this morning in The New York Times I read a lengthy story on how my friend Bob Stemple, who's the head of Chevrolet, is just making a deal with the Japanese, simply because the Chevette, which was his leading inexpensive car, no
longer makes money for Chevrolet. So I figure that if Chevrolet is not ashamed to have things made in Japan to be marketed in America, I shouldn't stand around and say, "Oh, but I can't have it if it's not made in America." I mean, that's up to each manufacturer, and I frankly have no opinions one way or the other.

Q: I think I meant your...I'm interested in what you know about the trend in the menswear market, about offshore production. In the women's wear market, so much production is offshore.

A: It's identical.

Q: Is it?

A: Sure.

Q: You hear about major clients...

A: Our sweaters are made in Guam, you know. I'm quite sure...

The trouble is, the moment somebody ties you to a specific structure; the moment somebody says, "Well, you know, we have to feed our factories in America," they end up in trouble, and you know it. Because it means that you are basically feeding uncompetitive factories very often.

Q: So as far as you're concerned, offshore production is happening in the menswear industry.

A: Exactly as it is in the women's wear.

Q: That certainly is true of shirts, isn't it? It's been done in Hong Kong for a very long time.

A: Oddly enough, not in my case. Our shirt manufacturers are producing here, maybe for our sins. I don't know. I'm talking not about sports shirts but about dress shirts.
Q: Yes. Right. Right. But you haven't really had to get involved in things like contractors and labor and...

A: Absolutely not.

Q: So it's just a very different kind of business. I want....

A: We are primarily interested in... We consider each manufacturer to be a marketing organization with cash on hand. From our point of view, if they have a marvelous showroom and, more importantly, if they have six or seven top flight executives who have entree to the major department stores, and if they have sufficient capital to be able to get the merchandise that should be made and should be produced and should be shipped, and if they have sufficient capital to be able. . .

End of Tape 2, Side 1
A: ...if they do or don't own factories is a complete non sequitur. It really doesn't make a difference. This is the age of the marketer. That is what we're concerned with. There are people who come to us and say, "We are the biggest private label manufacturers for J.C. Penney's and/or Sears, Roebuck; we do $40 million worth of business and we want to go into the John Weitz shirt business with the department stores," we say to them, "We admire your $40 million. Those $40 million are done in one room three times a year by one man and two men of theirs." That's not the way it works. "What marketing plans will you have? Where will be selling? To whom will you be selling? How much advertising money do you intend to spend? How much money are you going to spend on consigning merchandise into the stores if they need it? How are you going to compete with the existing brands?" And I always remember that recently there was a new cigarette brand launched, and when they asked the guy who was launching it for a great big tobacco company how he was going to do it, he said, "With 52 brands out there, you've got to shoot your way into the bar." And so we ask people, "How are you going to shoot your way into the bar? Tell us. We're not impressed with the $40 million that you do with...as contractors for somebody who finds you useful." So...

Q: Since you mentioned private brands...Private labels, rather. Do you have any other feelings about private labels?

A: No, no. I was a private label for a long time. John Weitz was a private label for Lord & Taylor, and John Weitz is now a private label for a group of department stores in Japan. I find it vitally important, provided the private label has character and personality. I find the private label
that is invented, the kind of private label that says, "Tree Gate," "Glen Baum," whatever it is, is nonsense. Because there's no there, there, as Gertrude Stein would say: There's no personality. There's no person to speak for it. Nobody to fasten yourself to. And I wouldn't mind at all being a private label. Not in the least. I love the idea of stores having the sense of difference. I think the most destructive thing about the American department store now is that Saks have the same stuff as Macy's and are proud of it! And that Saks has the same stuff as Bloomingdale's and are proud of it. I just saw the launch of a new home furnishings line--"Exclusively at Bloomingdale's." I'd like to know how long it takes for the other store to say, "Me too, me too! I've got it too!" Instead of saying, "Oh, come on. It's theirs. We don't need it, we don't want it. Let them play with it." The American store is an insecure creature.

Q: You do approve of it, you think it's a good idea because you think it will differentiate stores from each other.

A: What reason is there...I have heard so many nonsense explanations. I once asked the President of one of the most distinguished luxury stores in America why he is so proud of having the same stuff as Macy's. Which to me is a wonderful institution, but my God! It doesn't claim to be the small gem of a luxury store. He said, "Well, you see, they buy the same stuff; they get treated differently at our store." Well, that's a pretty thin explanation so far as I'm concerned. I'm still convinced that each store ought to have a sense of personality and ought to say, "You can only see this movie in my theatre. You can only get this designer in my store." That is the way I see a store developing strength and personality. Not through switching away from designers and building anonymous brands and saying, "This is the label."
Because then you return to the years when Saks Fifth avenue only had Sophie and when Bergdorf Goodman only had Bernie Newman. That's bad. I think the store ought to say, "I am the only one who has this designer. I am the only theatre that features this artist."

Q: Well, private label, as it is being used now as a phrase, refers to Saks Fifth Avenue or some other store doing merchandise only under its own name. Without the personality of the designer.

A: Well, the fact is, then, one has to count on the personality of the store. And at this point of the of the game, what is the personality of which store? Do tell me. What is it? You tell me. Is Bloomingdale's still "dear Bloomie's" on 59th Street, where the ladies used to send out for furniture got bought there because of the brave Mr. Schoff. But I remember when Maggie DeMille was fashion director there, poor baby, trying to run the Green Room or Blue Room or whatever it was. You couldn't get chic ladies there. So, what is Bloomingdale's now? Is it a great luxury store? It is still a total service department store, is it not? What is Saks, then? Is Saks the chic, expensive specialty operation on Fifth Avenue where, when you walk in, you had better be prepared to spend money? Not for as long as they share the same brands, the same designers, the same labels, the same attitudes, and are proud of it! They'd better develop differences as far as I'm concerned. The only one I think who's got it, and smilingly so, is Macy's. Because Macy's knew what they were. And any step in the right direction. I think that that marvelous thing that they did to their basement is extraordinary.

Q: The Cellar.
A: The Cellar, it's now called. To me it's still Macy's basement. But The Cellar is marvelous. I think it's grand. Because they really did what should be done, and that is when an inexpensive store fetches itself out of the morass and ends up saying, "Here. Come on in. We can do it." You can't tell me that there are not problems. You can't tell me that people are going to go to 34th Street as easily as they walk to 59th and Lexington. But by golly, they've managed. There are some people whom I never would have thought of who say, "I got it at Macy's." I think it's wonderful.

Q: I think I'd like to change the subject, because we're getting to the end. I would like to know if you would talk about some of the awards that you've gotten over the years, and how you feel about them.

A: It's so silly. I feel about them that each award gives me a chance to publicize the name of our brand. That's exactly the way I feel about them. I do not believe that they reflect, with the exception of one award I got, the opinions of the industry. Every other award is popularity contest. And that includes the Coty award, which is a pure popularity contest.

Q: Which is the award that you got that you think...?

A: The Sports Illustrated award. Because Time-Life was running it and Time-Life was so honorable and so tough that they actually paid attention to the votes, popularity or not. It might be that the nominations to some degree were popularity contests, but the fact is that when Time-Life gave out an award I had a perfect sense...For instance, when I lost it, twice, in nomination, I knew that I deserved to lose it; somebody else got more votes. Rudy Gernreich one year, Claire McCardell the next. They knew what they were doing.
So all the other awards are either nice, trumped-up cute things where you appear on the scene and there's a reason for it; it's some promotional thing, so why not? Or a popularity contest. And I'm not a great popularity contestor by the way, because the young press and I do not know each other very well. I don't believe that a 23 year old fashion editor, at this point of the game, is in a position to judge what I do for a living. She's only in a position to judge that which she herself, in her generation, would buy.

Q: As another subject in this history of you....Would you talk a little about some of the other interests that you have developed over the years? You are really a Renaissance man, and I think it's interesting to know that somebody who is essentially a designer has such a broad range of interests.

A: You must understand, I became a designer through circumstances, like most designers. Very few young people set out to say, "I'm going to be a fashion designer." Maybe recently that has happened in America, but in my day, it didn't. We fell into it by fluke. You know. If your father was a tailor, the chances were that you ended up in the tailoring shop. If your Mama was a dressmaker, you ended up a dressmaker. That's how Hardy Amies got to be a designer, and my guess that Trigere got to be a designer, because her family was involved in it. I fell into it as a fluke. And I found that, like most people, if you're successful at something or you can make a living at it, you end up doing it. If it is the right or the wrong choice, you find out much later. But for a long time, as you make more and more money at it and people applaud you and you win awards, you say, "Hey, this is where I belong." It may be that you find out one day that this is not where you belong.

Q: John, you're a very creative person, and the creative men-
tality really requires or seems to require, or can require, a lot of outlet for fulfillment. How do you feel about designing as your outlet, as your fulfillment?

Q: Well, in the first place, I can't talk for the creative person with a capital "C". I can only talk for myself. I know there are people who are totally creative only in the fashion business. That's the limit of their creation. That's all they ever wanted to create. That's all they know. That's all they want. Many of them are terribly well read but have no intention ever of doing anything but reading. In my particular case I truly find that the business of fashion design is not that all fulfilling; that I find untapped reservoirs, such as my way to write, my need to photograph, my amusement with the design of things like houses and cars or, safety razors, which urged me on to have a crack at something else, possibly because of my early training in an old dressmaking house. Things that then intrigued me no longer intrigue me. I thought it would be glorious if I could spend all my time smelling great perfume and speaking to great ladies. And you know what? If I saw those same ladies today the chances are they'd bore me to tears. But that is simply a matter of growing up. Or growing different.

I, for myself, need to exploit that which is trained in me, because I did go to great schools and for a short time to a great university, because I love the language and love to use it and because I love the story of life. To me fashion is only one part of that, and so I like to tell stories about life, and not only tell them in clothes but tell them in words.

Q: And tell them in pictures.

A: And pictures. Eventually, when I photograph, I'd like to see
through a camera something that somebody else might not see, or that even
the subject might not see, and then to tell it as it comes along. It's
enormous fun. So there we are. I would find myself stultified, the same
way as I probably started out as a multi-faceted fashion designer. Because
if somebody had said to me, "Here. Design dresses for the rest of your life,"
I would have shot myself. I couldn't do that. I need to design many things.
Because there's only so much that needs to be done in each field. And how
many times can you fiddle around with a blouse? And after you get through
with all the journalism, all the nonsense; after you get through saying,
"This is the Fencer's blouse; this is the Sea Captain's blouse; this is the
French baggage porter's blouse; this is the Greek fisherman's blouse," which
is all HM: it's all horse manure, because you're journalizing. It really is
not a fencer's blouse. Yes, it's a blouse with a full sleeve, so you say it's
a fencer's blouse. Thinking in terms not of fencing (which today is a very
modern sport), but in terms of D'Artagnan and The Three Musketeers.

Q: Would it be fair to say that designing has been, for you,
a way of enabling you financially to undertake some of the other activities
in which you have great interest?

A: Absolutely and completely. I think it's a marvelous way to
make a buck. I was with Bill Buckley a couple of nights ago, or days ago, and
I said, "Do you like making speeches?" And he said, "I hate it." And I said,
"Why do you do it?" And he said, "Loot, loot, lucre. To make money at it."

Q: Well, you don't hate design.

A: No, I don't hate design, no. But it's a perfectly lovely
way of make a living. Anyone who thinks it's more than that is off his rocker.
Believe me, you will not get a Nobel prize for that. I don't think I'll ever get a Nobel prize for my writing either, but let's face the fact that at least that is a means by which one can strive toward something like it. Whereas in design what are you going to get? A popularity prize? The fourth citation to the third version of the fourth degree of the Coty award? Good morning, good night. There was one damn award that was given out...I refused to participate in one entire press event each year, because they feature a certain award. It was an award called the Cutty's, given out by a booze company, Cutty Sark. And they had assured me that it was an open award and the winners would not be known until the last moment. I arrived on the scene one day, innocently, to find that the winners were already there; people I knew who would never turn up at this event. And I said, "What are you doing here?" and they said, "Oh, we've been told to come here to get our awards." You know. So I said, "To hell with this. I'm not going to participate in this kind of nonsense." So I turned down the entire event, which is a men's fashion event that takes place every year.

Q: Which I am sure is considered very prestigious.

A: It's not prestigious, but it's a nice...It's not prestigious by any means. It's a perfectly nice way...Frankly, it would be more prestigious if characters like me turned up there. But it isn't. Because the great newspapers don't appear. The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Chicago Tribune are not there. The United Press and AP are not there. Newsweek and Time are not there. People from Sports Illustrated are not there. So...

Q: And that makes a difference, of course.

A: Sure.
Q: John, just as a final thing, could we just update your own personal life. I think that we really just need to know very briefly...

A: Well, I was married three times, ten years each the first two times, starting in 1952...Excuse me. 1942 to 1952 the first time; 1954 to '64 the second time; and I now have been joyously married to Susan for 19 years.

Q: And you have two sons.

A: We have two sons, and I have two children from my first marriage. My first two children are 34 and 32, and my younger children are 17 and 13. The 17 year old is a freshman at Wesleyan University, having gone to Collegiate School in New York, and to Allan Stevenson School. And my 13 year old is now a senior at Allan Stevenson School, on his way to St. Paul's School in London, my old school, next year. And after that, I hope, a year later, I hope he'll come back to Collegiate School in New York. The choice of college is then his, because he's much brighter than I was so he'll have no problems.

Q: Has either of them expressed any interest in what you do?

A: I never asked them.

Q: You never asked them.

A: No. I think they like the idea of having a Dad who's somewhat known. One was a finalist in a national young playwright's contest. And the other one will probably end up writing and doing very well. I haven't the faintest idea of what either one is going to do.

Q: I really didn't mean that. I just meant are they interested in what your work is?

A: Yes. Of course. I remember once...From the earliest days.
I remember sitting at home sketching 30 or 40 things but I didn't put any heads on them. When I got back I found that one of the kids had carefully drawn various faces on the tops of them. So they know what I do and they think it's amusing. And long ago I used to have to explain to them that Daddy isn't playing when he makes those funny little figures and draws them. Because to them, that's fun. Isn't that nice? Daddy's drawing little pictures.

Q: They've inherited your ability to sketch, at least...

A: They sketch well. Both. But most of all they are fascinated watching me pound out a book. Because they know that the television set may be on and things may be going on, conversation, and I sit there ploughing away at a scene, because it fascinates me. And if I get distracted I know that what I'm writing just isn't good enough. Because I always quit with each chapter when something is about to happen. And people say, "Why do you do that?" It was John Steinbeck who taught me that. He said, "Always quit when you want to find out what happens next."

Q: John, I really want to find out what's going to happen next very soon. In the meantime, thank you very much.