

Interview with Ira Neimark by Bruce M. Stave and Sondra Astor Stave for the G. Fox Oral History Project, Connecticut Historical Society, September 18, 2006 at the home of Mr. Neimark in Harrison, New York.

BSTAVE: Okay, I'd like to begin by talking to you about where and when you were born, a little bit about your early life. Where and when you were born, your early education, your parents, etcetera.

NEIMARK: Well, as I say here in the book, I was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1921. I was one of three brothers. My father was a lawyer, but unfortunately he died in an automobile accident when I was eleven years old during the Great Depression, and had to leave high school in the second year to go to work. And fortunately, found a position at—during Christmas of 1938 -- at a store on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue called Bonwit Teller. I was hired for Christmas, if I fit the uniform of a page boy for the 721 Club. That was a club for men to shop in during Christmas. When I arrived, as I mention here, I realized that the environment was something I really enjoyed. The president of the store, the salespeople, the elevator operators all looked like people from a show. They all were rehearsing their part, and I said, "This is what I would like to participate in," and decided to make retailing my career.

After Christmas was over, they were nice enough to keep me on as assistant to the doorman for about a year, where I learned how you greet customers. Very important, and after a year I was brought up to be the president's office boy and really not knowing, but I became his protégé. He was behind most of the moves. A year later he sent me down to the basement to be the stock boy for the handbag department

because that's the group that he had taken when he was going up. And so I learned the background of retailing, and fortunately, Bill Holmes, who was the president, knew Beatrice Fox Auerbach for many years and was one of her many admirers. I didn't learn about this until years later.

While I was a stock boy, the Second World War came about and I enlisted in the Army Air Corps as a pilot and served in the Pacific theater, also in the book. Returned, in 1946 because merchandise control manager for Bonwit Teller and watched as the store was sold to the Hoving corporation, expanding a store into Boston and a store into Chicago within a year of each other. Destroyed the store and they eventually were sold. I was fortunate to be there to watch the store being built successfully and also fortunate there to see what it takes to have a store reach its demise. So I learned quite well.

At that point, I went to Providence, Rhode Island to be a merchandise manager and was there for eight years.

BS: Where—what—

SASTAVE: Go back please. What year was this then?

IN: This, I moved to Providence, Rhode Island in 1951. I left out a part, that one of my functions at Bonwit Teller was to be a blouse buyer because in the functioning as a merchandise control manager, I kept telling buyers here's what they must do and they in turn said, if I was buyer, they would know I was asking a very difficult situation. Objectives. As a blouse buyer they were correct. I was not very successful. I was much better managing buyers than selecting merchandise and was fortunate enough to be chosen to become the

merchandise manager at Gladdings in Providence in 1951 and Gladdings was the oldest retail store in America, 1766. I would kid my contemporaries to say, “We can prove it. We have merchandise to prove how old it is.” In any case, very fortunate for me, the Gladdings store belonged to a buying office called Frederick Atkins Buying Office. And when I say fortunate, not knowing when I accepted the job, the Frederick Atkins Buying Office had all the major stores in America in their company, and one of them was Beatrice Fox Auerbach’s store, G. Fox & Company, which is how I first came to know Beatrice Fox Auerbach.

It came about one day. I was the Chairman of the General Merchandise Managers’ Meeting in Dallas, Texas for the Atkins Stores, and my oldest daughter, Jane, had just been born. And my wife asked if I would bring back a dress for her from Neiman Marcus, and Mrs. Auerbach attended the meeting, and since she was a grandmother, I asked if she would mind coming to Neiman Marcus and selecting a dress for me – for my daughter. And she did. We went there. She went through the racks, as only a professional could, and she then said, “Please have Stanley Marcus come down right away.” She then berated Stanley and said, “Don’t you realize that if you’re going to run Neiman Marcus, you have to have a complete assortment of dresses?” And he sat there listening to her as a retail student.

BS: [laughs]

IN: And this was the first of many lessons of mine that Mrs. Auerbach said.

BS: I just want to go back for a minute. This was your first meeting with her?

IN: Yes. One of my first meetings with her. At these meetings – these General Merchandise Managers’ Meetings – that’s where I became familiar with her. Shortly after, at Gladdings, I had developed an open-to-buy management procedure that I still use today, that Beatrice Fox Auerbach got interested in. Would I come to her store to show her people how this procedure worked? And I declined, saying, “No, a prophet is without honor in his own country, that they would resist it. And she understood that. However, whenever I would drive to Providence from New York, which I did once a week -- I would go up I-95 – I would pass by Hartford, and I’d look in the distance, and I’d see the G. Fox building, and I said hopefully one day I would work there, because this was my ideal. This was *the* great merchant of all times, and a woman. Then I was called by a few other people, would I be interested in making a move to another store? Gladdings was doing quite well under my direction, fortunately. The amazing thing – in the book I keep talking about how a pin ball bounces in life and making it successful. So, I went to Bill Holmes and said, “I’m ready to make a move to leave Gladdings.” And he said, “Fine. Let me call Bloomingdales.” He wanted to talk to Jeb Davidson, a friend of his, and he was not there. He said, “Okay, let me make another call.” He called, to my good fortune, Beatrice Fox Auerbach. Yes, she was there. And yes, she would like to meet me. And yes, we arranged – by going into detail here – of how I met her. But long story short, we sat down and talked about my becoming Assistant to the General Merchandise Manager, Sam Einstein, who you may have heard about.

Mr. Einstein was not excited about a thirty-five year old, young fellow joining a sixty-five year old man, who was not looking forward to retiring. But nevertheless, he accepted me reluctantly. I say reluctantly because not only he, but the other merchandise managers in G. Fox were very curious why would Beatrice Fox Auerbach bring someone in from outside, when they were all looking forward to succeed – well, three of them were looking forward to succeed Sam Einstein – where did this fellow come from?

Beatrice Auerbach explained to me one time, the reason she hired me is I had grown up in specialty stores, where people come in to buy because they want to buy apparel. Merchandise people who work in different departments, work in department stores. Customers come in to buy pillows, blankets, sheets and dishes. And oh, yes, they'll buy apparel. So, the ready-to-wear person in a specialty store had to know what to do to bring clients in – customers in – and she felt I could help by bringing customers in to her store. That was a department store.

I worked there for the first few weeks, and was asked would I bring the figures to Mrs. Auerbach's home. Fortunately for me, when Jackie and I bought a home in Hartford –

BS: West Hartford?

IN: In West Hartford – on Belknap Road. It was around the corner from Prospect Avenue, not knowing that Beatrice Fox Auerbach's home was only two blocks away. Because, where we lived, you'd see a golf course, and they made that into a home. So, I didn't mind dropping the daily figures off that night to Mrs. Auerbach's home at 1040 Prospect Avenue. And I did. And, as I rang the bell, in this beautiful

mansion with a circular driveway, the maid asked would I mind coming in for a few moments to see Mrs. Auerbach. She was sitting in front of the fireplace, on the left-hand side of the fireplace. She asked me to sit on the right-hand side of the fireplace, and would I mind reviewing the daily figures with her, not only for the departments I was responsible for, but my comments on other departments. I then remarked to her that she was signing invoices at a small table, and I said, “My wife’s father has a business in Providence, and he has a small table and does the same thing, but she has such a large store. I’m surprised” She said, “If it wasn’t for my doing the detail, I wouldn’t have such a large store. Well, fortunately for me, maybe once or twice a week, the maid would ask me to come in and review the figures with Mrs. Auerbach. Other nights, “Thank you very much. Call Mrs. Neimark and tell her you’re going to be delayed because you’re going to review the figures with me.” So, it became a habit. I developed a relationship with Mrs. Auerbach of tremendous admiration for a woman of brilliance, understanding, compassion, and every virtue you could hope to see in a person. And, obviously, I would do whatever it was that she required me to do. In saying that, one day she called me to her office. I beg your pardon – she made me President of Brown Thompson, the store next –door to G. Fox, which was a run-down place. She called me in the office – she called my home – Jackie called me to say, “Mrs. Auerbach would like to see you. She’ll pick you up in a car.” It was Monday, the stores were closed. I got in the car, and the thunder and lightning storm came, and with it foretold what she was going to say. Did she want me to leave G. Fox and become the President of Brown

Thompson? I was flabbergasted, discouraged, disturbed and annoyed. I left a wonderful job, great position, great home in Providence, to move to the great G. Fox, and here I am, relegated to a secondary store. I was very upset.

I took the opportunity to call Bill Holmes, my mentor, and drove down to the Westchester Country Club. And he was quite ill at that point. And I explained my dilemma. I didn't want to take the job. I didn't move to Hartford to go to Brown Thompson. His advice was, "Take it." And I was puzzled. Why should I take it? He said, "Mrs. Auerbach has a problem. She wants someone to take care of the problem. She selected you. If you don't help her with his problem, she may never ask you again." So, reluctantly, I accepted the position, and I was there for two years, that I didn't enjoy one moment of it. I converted the store, got it back on track, hired a fine, young fellow to run it. I was then brought back to G. Fox and put in a corner office, and I felt Mr. Einstein and the other merchandise manager were not overjoyed to see me return to G. Fox.

BS: What were those two years?

IN: 1962 to 1964. When I came back, I felt like the movie *All Quiet on the Western Front*, where Lew Ayres was thought to be dead, and they put him in the dead room, and he was gone. And that's how the Merchandise Manager at G. Fox felt. "Neimark is gone, we don't have to worry about him!" When she brought me back, I felt like Lew Ayres again, saying, "I'm back, I made it. I'm here." And a year later  
– 1965 –

BS: Right.

IN: Sam Einstein retired, and I finally became the General Merchandise Manager of G. Fox & Company. The best part of being the Manager of G. Fox is every Saturday, Mrs. Auerbach would invite me to lunch in her office. And I mention her office – her desk was kind of high. Her seat was high. And the people who sat in front, sat on stools, which were quite low, so it gave her a position of dominance looking down, and you paid attention when she spoke. But her conference room had a long board table, and we would sit there and have lunch, and she would ask me what did I think of this and think of that. Then she would say, “Let’s go,” and we would start on the eleventh floor, and go floor-to-floor, work our way through, until five-thirty in the afternoon, asking questions of the buyers, why don’t they have this? And she knew every aspect of the store. I learned more from Beatrice Fox Auerbach how to run that store than any other factor. There are stories in between that you will see out of here, but –

BS: When you say out of here – when talking about the book – can you explain the book, and what state it’s in, etc.?

IN: Well, what happened was that one day she called me to the office and said that she was very upset. That the Federated Department Stores had just bought Bullocks & Magnims, two very fine stores on the West Coast – and the Federal Trade Commission prohibited Federated from buying any other store, and she was disappointed because her hope was if she ever sold the store, she would sell it – they call it ‘merging.’ We’ll discuss that later. If she ever merged the store, she wanted to merge with Federated because she had been a great admirer of the Lazarus Brothers, who ran Federated. But since they couldn’t, it wasn’t much later that she called me into the office again, a month



or two later, and said, “This is confidential information. The May Company is going to merge with G. Fox.” I wasn’t familiar with the May Company so I went to Women’s Wear Daily, the retail newspaper, and looked at the names of the stores and the May Company – and I was disappointed, because except for two stores, they were highly promotional, and I said, “This will be my opinion that it’s the beginning of the end of G. Fox as we knew it.” It might be successful under their management but it is not the management of Beatrice Auerbach, which is ‘take care of the customers first.’

SAS: Why did she want to merge-in with somebody else?

IN: Eventually, family – private families – could not have the financing necessary to do – expand as the major chains were doing, or have the funds to hire a top talent in the business. And having family run the family stores, it just didn’t work. She had two son-in-laws, Bernard Schiro and Richard Koopman. They’re both fine gentlemen. Richard Koopman was in charge of operations, and Bernard was the Merchandise Manager of the Children’s Departments. I was the Executive Vice President when they finally became Chairmen and President. The May Company said to me at one point that I would become the President after a period of time, and it was about this time that Beatrice Auerbach got very sick. I went through the store for the last time, and she was coughing all the way through, and I said, “Mrs. Auerbach, is this necessary?” Meanwhile, we’re going through the store. Unfortunately, she got deathly ill and she passed away.

BS: In 1968?

IN: 1968. I say in the book that she never knew whether she did the right thing for her employees. And that was uppermost in her mind, all the

way -- her employees first. I'm not sure she did the right thing for her employees, but she had no other way to do it! The store had to be maintained by people who had the finances behind it, and the May Company did. Her brother-in-law, Les Samuels – Fan's husband – told me it was a good thing to make the move because now the family could get income out of the May Company stock, whereas Beatrice used to keep putting the money back into G. Fox.

BS: [laughs]

IN: When I first got there, G. Fox had three-quarters of a block, and after a while, she then wanted the whole block. And one of the fortunate things that happened to me was she asked all the merchandise people if they would please submit the report as to how they would recommend that extra space be handled. Fortunately, at Gladdings, we had built a branch store, and I got very involved in the planning of this store. So, I used a format I had learned how to say, "Here's the space we have. Here's how large it is. Here's the volume. Here's the newspaper ad, here's the proposed volume and the proposed space." And I made a very organized report and gave her a copy, and fortunately, the copy to Sam Einstein and also the financial head. Well, she read the report. Beatrice Auerbach began pushing the buttons, and the executive call lights would go on all over the store. Get to the office right away. And they came in and she said, "Why do we have to have a young man like Ira Neimark who just joined, to give me a comprehensive report, when most of you put on a yellow piece of paper what we recommend?" Fortunately, I had given the report to other people, and in the book I say, "Lesson learned." When you're going to present something to the CEO, make sure the other

people have a copy. Don't let them sit there with egg on their face. They may not be able to improve it, but they can't say they didn't know what's happening. Well, that plus winning some sales contests and all that she then elevated me, as I mentioned previously, to be the General Merchandise Manager. But after she died, the May Company and I did not get along. And she made a very interesting comment. Lincoln Greise was related to her, and he was the CEO of May Company at the time of the merger. She then rationalized that she could merge with May Company because a relative of her was the CEO, and that is stretching rationalization a long way because within six months after the sale was made, Lincoln Greise retired, and Stanley Goodman, the President of Famous Barr became the CEO. Beatrice Fox said – he called. I was in her office one day when he called. He'd like to visit the store. And she said, "No, I don't want you to visit the store." He said, "Why not?" She said, "Because you were rude enough to put your salary in the newspaper, and I don't believe that should be done." I cautioned Mrs. Auerbach my recommendations that he would now be the new CEO of May Company, and it's worth our while that you get along with him. She then said meanwhile, "He's a very vain man, and there's only one thing worse than a vain woman – a vain man."

BS: [laughs]

IN: And he proved that years later, because he and I did not relate to each other, and I left the company two years later to become the General Merchandise Manager of B. Altman.

BS: In what year?

IN: 1969. To become the General Merchandise Manager of B. Altman, which was a wonderful job because the man who came from May Company to become President always wanted that B. Altman job, and I was forced to get it. But the point I wanted to make in that when Stanley Goodman was the guest speaker at the National Retail Dry Goods Association, he recounted all his bright guys, and he said, “Ira Neimark is one of his protégés, and I said, “That’s vanity.”

BS: [laughs]

IN: I might add, when Beatrice Auerbach went to the NRGBA, and there might have been a hundred retailers in the audience – when she walked in – I was there – everyone stood up and applauded. A hundred people applauding this little lady walking down the aisle. She was thought of in that particular manner.

BS: Why was she so well thought of? What was there about her?

IN: She was a principled woman who had great compassion and understanding of people. She put the people in her organization and the customers first. The business followed. And by doing that, the business was successful. Most retailers conceive of their stores as what they want, how they want it. And if they get the one thing that Beatrice Auerbach was known for, and that was customer service. When you walked in that store – let me put it another way. As a Merchandise Manager of the store, if she saw me in the office, which only happened once during the day – “I want you on the floor. You can be in the office until ten-thirty to do your paperwork. I want you on the floor. I want you watching the department. I want you to take care of the customers.” This was a rare thing. Every Saturday I took the podium from the floor and I (manager) stood there and did my

work on the podium, so I always was on the floor. She went up and down the escalators, she nodded that I was there. She felt that paying attention to customers was the single-most important function of a retailer.

BS: What's the motivation? Why was she so unusual in that respect?

IN: I wrote a letter today to the head of Federated Department Stores. They have just bought the May Company, and they were converting four hundred stores to Macys, and they outlined in the newspaper yesterday, eight steps they're taking to be successful. I wrote the story, You Missed the Ninth Step. Service, to take care of the customer. Beatrice Auerbach was violent on the subject. She never fired anybody, but they would be demoted. In other words, if you didn't perform, you were moved. Where other Atkin stores, and there were wonderful lists of them, with all submitted figures for a black book – it would show all their sales, profits and departments – she never would. She said, "I own the store. It's nobody else's business. However, if you want to know it, come to the store and I'll show it to you." Well, fortunately for me, Jack Burke and Randy Stanbaugh, the Chairman and President of B. Altman & Company, called to do that, and she asked if I would take them through the store and tell them anything they wanted to know. Five years later, after she had passed on and I decided I wasn't going to be with May Company, they called me to become the Merchandise Manager of B. Altman New York, which if you're familiar with, it was a great store. They said the principles and practices of Beatrice Fox Auerbach is what they want to have in B. Altman. So, I learned fashion at Bonwit Teller. I learned merchandising principles in Gladdings in Providence. But I

learned how to run a store from Beatrice Fox Auerbach. So, that was when I went to Altman's and was quite successful.

BS: Could you describe the store when you first came there, and in the number of years that you were there, if it changed over time?

IN: G. Fox?

BS: Yes. Physically and otherwise.

IN: Well, actually, G. Fox was always a good store. She had put in again, sound, basic principles of what a customer requires coming into a store. Broad aisles. Well displayed. Excellent salespeople. Don't forget, in those days, the stores were closed on Monday, due to the war, when they couldn't get merchandise and they couldn't get salespeople. But I think more importantly, the insurance companies had a five-day week. Monday through Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. And to hire qualified people in retailing, you had to give them the five-day week, also. So, the stores were closed on Monday and open on Tuesday through Saturday. No Sundays in those days. So, the principle of having all the salespeople on deck every day instead of 'this one's on Monday; this one's on Tuesday' allowed a woman to come to the store and ask for Annie in the Lingerie Department. She knows the size I have and the color I like, and she takes care of her. So, again, I'm back to the point – if you walk into a store today, except possibly a store like Neiman's or Bergdorf – but it happens there as well. In the average store, you will be a long time looking for a salesperson to find what you want, much less know what they're selling you. So, this was her high point. She left the merchandising to each of the Merchandising Managers, which meant it was okay, but not great. Example? Estee Lauder, before I got there,

came to G. Fox and met the Merchandising Manager, and he didn't like the cosmetic line and turned her down. And they went to Sage Allen, which was down the street – they went there. And when I got to G. Fox, I asked about Estee Lauder, and they explained, “Well, we didn't have it because it went to Sage Allen.” Well, it took a long time, but we eventually got it back. Charles Revson was very unhappy because he came to see the store – he had just started a nail polish business, and the Merchandise Manager kept him waiting for two hours, and Revson left, and Beatrice Auerbach got in the car, when she heard the story, drove up to New York, and invited him to lunch to apologize for the rudeness to him. And that was Beatrice Auerbach on how she would do things. My book outlines step by step what I learned from Beatrice Fox Auerbach.

BS: [laughs]

IN: The whole story is there. I recounted chapter and verse of how, when I was invited down to meet with her to discuss accepting the position, and I was driving from Providence to Hartford, I had a flat tire, of all places, and I said in the book, “You don't have to be a Harvard Business School graduate to know if you're going to have an interview and you're going to be an hour late or two hours late, that's not the way to get a job.” A G. Fox truck pulled up out of nowhere, fixed the tire, and I said, “I'm going to see Mrs. Auerbach,” and he acted like that was nothing different and nothing new. And I got up there. She most likely alerted her driver that a young fellow – a single fellow in a car – coming across the Rhode Island border was coming. “Keep an eye out for him. Make sure he gets here.” The second part of that story, when I finally did come back the next trip to accept the

position, Jackie had a red convertible Chevy, and Jackie, as you will see – everything has to be neat and clean as B&A or cleaner. The reason we don't [unclear] the Chevy had not been dusted or cleaned. So, when we concluded the arrangement. "Yes, I would like to work at the store," and, yes, she would give me an increase of salary I was earning, which Sam Einstein didn't quite agree to, but we got it. She said, "Now, just send Bill the chauffer home," and he will dinner with me at home. I said, "Fine, but the car is filthy and I'm very embarrassed." She said nothing more. I could have written my name on the dashboard, it was so dusty. But she obviously knew that I was very concerned about it, and no questions asked. But I have to tell you one story that again answers a lot of questions for you. After the interview, we were leaving the department, and on her floor was the Toy Department. As we were leaving, I had promised my older daughter, Janie, who must have been four or five then, a harmonica. And we went to the toy buyer and Mrs. Auerbach said to the toy buyer, "Mr. Neimark wants to buy a harmonica. What do you have?" She said, "I have this one for fifty cents and this one for five dollars." She said, "Well, what do you have in-between?" She said, "I don't have anything in-between," and she began to rant and rave, as she always did – out loud, on the floor, in front of customers. "I own this store! I can never find what I want!" I said, "Let me take the fifty cent one and we'll go." She said, "Don't you have another daughter?" I said, "Yes, Robin, but she's just an infant." She said, "Well, it doesn't matter. No matter what age a girl is, she expects a present."

SAS: [laughs]



IN: So, they had little plastic telephones – a white one and a blue one. And she said to the buyer, “Please let me have a pink one.” And the poor fellow began coming apart at the seams. “I don’t have a pink one.” And again, she ranted and raved. I said, ‘Let me take the white one and get out of here.’ But I use that example. That was whenever she’d go to the store. She’d go to the bra department and said, “If a woman comes in and wants a 34B-- by turning on an electric light, you expect the light to go on--so you expect the size to be in stock. So, she asked me to join the company to make sure that she’d always have in stock whatever we needed. And that was the basis of my merchandising experience with Beatrice Auerbach.

SAS: Do you have any sense as to how her style of management differed from her father?

IN: Hmmmm. Her father – as I understood it – I didn’t know him – her father would go through the store, and didn’t want anyone to know who he was.

BS: Oh.

IN: Interesting. Her father also had a rule that she followed. This is an important point. All the mail that came to the store, no matter whom it was addressed to, it was opened by management. I didn’t know this until after I was in the store possibly three or four weeks, when she gave me a bunch of envelopes. I was surprised because I had heard from no one, particularly we call the market people we work with, that they would write a letter of congratulations. “Here are your letters.” I said, “Well, why are they here?” She said, “We read all the mail that comes to the store. Anything that comes to the store is G. Fox property, and I learn more about what’s going on by doing that.” I

said, “Well, that’s a violation of privacy.” She said, “Maybe it is, but that’s what my father did, and that’s what I do.” By contrast, as you know, twenty-five years later, e-mail – you’re not allowed to look at others’. However, about her father she said when she met her husband, George, which I’m sure you’ve been told about – she and her sister, Fanny, met George – as I heard this story – when they went to Europe for the Grand Tour. And the Auerbach brothers – George and a fellow that Fran married – they moved to Salt Lake City. But Beatrice’s father was getting quite old, and they figured that George would come back to Hartford. He was so popular in Utah. He could have been Governor or something. But he came back to live in Hartford, and to take her father’s place. Well, unfortunately, he died of some misdiagnosis method you may have heard about – I’m not sure what happened – and Beatrice had to take over from the father. But two things I’ve always remembered she said. “Even though I’m a woman, from the neck up, I’m the same as a man.”

BS: [laughs]

IN: And also, she said to me one day, “All my dresses have pockets in them.” I said, “Why is that?” She said, “I’m not very good at arithmetic and I have to use my fingers, and I don’t want anybody to see me.”

BS: [laughs]

IN: But she was human and confident and she had standards. I guess what I’m getting at is – coming back to your question, which is a good one – she had the highest standards of anyone I’ve ever worked with.

SAS: Do you know why her sister and her brother-in-law weren’t active in the store, as well?

IN: Fannie's husband passed away and she married a man called Les Samuels. Les Samuels had Samuels Stores in Salt Lake City. So, I assume Fan stayed with Les. And if you look at PBS Channel 13 and you see the symphony orchestra or whatever is on, you'll see the Foundation of Les and Fan Samuels. All their Foundation money went to that. And as a matter of fact, the opening of Lincoln Center, the first night – it would be 1965 or something – she asked Jackie and me to go with her. We drove all the way to New York and we were there opening night. She stayed on because she had an apartment in the city; we came home. But, again, your point of what did she do – she would walk through the stores with me, but when we went to a store in New York, she would call the President! She'd say, "I'm in the store. I would like to let you know. Don't come down, but I don't like to walk through a store without anyone knowing." But Harold Krensky was the President of Bloomingdales – wonderful merchant. She was looking for a backboard for her apartment in the City, on 54<sup>th</sup> Street, I think. And they had one in the department, but it would take forever to deliver it. Like Stanley Marcus, she called Harold on the phone. "Harold, I'm down here in your Department. What kind of service is this?" She raised the bloody devil!

BS: [laughs]

IN: Again, if I want it, I want it now! Not only for her – but for customers. And that goes back to your question, "What made her so outstanding?" She, every month would have all the special order books brought to her office, meaning people she went over to make sure they're kept up-to-date. "If you promised something, I want to

know it.” So, on detail she was beyond the pale, which was very good for me.

SAS: Now, I’m going in the other direction. Her two sons-in-law were active in the business.

IN: Yes.

SAS: Did her daughters work in the business, as well?

IN: No. Dorothy and Georgette were typical, wonderful daughters. When I say ‘typical’ – didn’t work there. They raised wonderful families and they were very supportive of their husbands, and I got to know them and I liked them very much, and they were very good to me. Very cordial. The family was very cordial to Jackie and me. They were wonderful. We watched the children grow up.

BS: When you were at G. Fox, what were the customers like? I mean, they were obviously people who Beatrice Fox Auerbach wanted to satisfy. But who were the customers? And did the customers change at all?

IN: It’s interesting. It’s a very interesting question. The customers were upper class, middle America. And let me try to explain that. [laughs] I’m going backwards to answer your question.

BS: Sure.

IN: I became an advisor to the largest department store in Japan called Mitsukoshi.

BS: Right.

IN: Well, this was after I retired. I’d say 1992 or 1993.

BS: Let’s see. I have a note. February 6, 1992.

IN: Where did you get that, on Google?

BS: This is Google. [laughs]

IN: In any case, Mitsukoshi reminded me of G. Fox & Company fifty years later. It was big, it was neat, it was orderly, and the service was terrific. But to your question. When you go to a dining room – they had a large dining room – except for being Japanese, it looked just like G. Fox customers of fifty years earlier. Upper middle class, hats, gloves, children, family. Everybody had fine manners. And that was going back to the 1960s, when the Connecticut Room was the restaurant.

BS: Right.

IN: And you looked at the customers. They were all well-mannered, well-dressed, well-handled. In those days, you didn't have jeans and t-shirts. Men wore ties and women wore hats and gloves, and it was very good. But to answer that question in another way, when it came time for me to make my first trip to Europe for G. Fox, in 1967, she said, "Mr. Neimark, I want you to go to the hotels that my family and I went to so you can understand the kind of customers and taste level. I want you to go to first class because I want you to sit next to customers – people I like to think are my customers. I want you to go to the Ritz Hotel in Paris." "Yes, Mrs. Auerbach." "I want you to stay at the Hassler in Rome." "Yes, Mrs. Auerbach."

BS: [laughs]

IN: "In London, I want you to stay in the Connaught ." So, we still go to the Ritz Hotel. I go there once a year for some of my Hermes Board meetings. But it was Beatrice Auerbach saying, to answer your question – this is the type of customer I want, and this is the type of environment I want, this is the type of background I want. So, the whole thing was set and consistent all the way through. Now, we also

had a basement store. In the olden days, before discount stores, there were basement stores, and she said these were the immigrants who came to Hartford, who didn't have the funds to buy at the upstairs store, they had a right to buy it from her from the downstairs store. Well, eventually, the basement stores got upscale and the discount stores came in. She did not get involved with me on discount stores. One of my claims to fame is one of the meetings in 1959, I was a Chairman of the Frederick Atkins store principals meeting – that's an honor. So, before I went, I went to Ann & Hope Mills in Pawtucket, and I realized that the discount stores were – my opinion – I'm sure if you saw them then, you'd say, "This is going to be a revolution in retailing." I went to the meeting, and with all the store presidents who made their presentation – this is 1959 – talked about the branch store expansion, the credit business, this and that. They said, "All right, Neimark. It's your turn to speak." I said, "I've got a problem. The discount stores are going to open in New England – and the outlets – and they're going to spread around the country, and they're going to destroy the privately-owned family store unless we take steps necessary." And their answer was, "Ira Neimark, you worry too much." I have in my book the list of all the stores in Atkins office. There's only one out of fifty left. The discount stores came in, and family owned stores were all gone. I was able to foresee that. I didn't foresee that discount stores would become brick and mortar, and the anchor. I didn't realize they'd become that strong. But all these stores, including G. Fox, eventually passed. I said it's the steamships of that era, they, too, disappeared. Because they were living in the past; not in the future.

BS: Now, with respect to the basement store, and the kind of patrons, were minorities working at G. Fox when you were there?

IN: Yes. That's a very good question. BFA was the first retailer to have black salespeople and black mannequins in the window. She was a leader in minority development. She's the first one who had a retirement program for employees, medical for her employees. As tough as she was on how to run a business, she had compassion for minorities and employees. If someone was an employee and had an accident or got sick or passed away, she was there. At the hospital if they were sick, at the funeral if they died. They were her family. She always called it the G. Fox Family. They made an effort on what is called the Moses Fox Club, which I did not cover here because there is so much to write about. The Moses Fox Club was held every year. Wives of the hosts were not invited, only the men executives. It was black tie, honoring Moses Fox, her father. And she'd have on the dais – people who had been there thirty, forty, fifty years. It was honoring them as well – she'd always give a souvenir. But that was to honor her employees and to honor her father. But, back to your point, the employees came first. They weren't the most highly paid, but they knew – as I felt that I had – when I say a job for life, once I got to be General Manager, everything was going well, I said, "This is where I want to be." But I didn't realize then that a family-owned company would not be able to continue. I would have been a major Executive. Another Executive, Russell Neisloss, who was the Treasurer – Russell would have been Chairman, and the two of us – he was a professional in operations and finance and I was savvy in merchandising. But that wasn't to be because the Federated, May Company, Allied Stores –

they all wanted G. Fox. And she finally went to May Company, whether it was the right decision or not, the family did very well.

BS: A couple of questions I don't want to forget. One, going back to the – you mentioned black mannequins in the window and salespeople.

IN: Yes.

BS: Again, the motivation, the origin – why would she have been a leader in this? What about her --?

IN: I'll simplify answering your question. She would say, "I want the store run like I run my home. Everything's in place, everything is neat. I have black nannies for my children, I have black maids." But everything is in place. She would go to the store, and she would take a table and move it or have somebody move it if there's dirt. And one day when she came to my Department, and I was merchandise divisional at that point, I had a Lingerie Department on low racks. I said, "You'll never find dirt in my department." Big shot. She moved the stuff aside and put her hand on the lower rack and said, "Here's dust." I shut up from then on.

BS: [laughs]

SAS: [laughs]

IN: I had a greater idea when I was merchandising in the piece goods Department. I called her and said, "I have something I want to show you." She actually would come down. She came down. She said, "I've been very busy. What is it?" I told her. She said, "Well, that's not important," and she began ranting on the floor. I went back to the office and said, "Look, Mrs. Auerbach, I like working with you, but I can't work with you if you're going to degrade me in front of the people I work with. It isn't going to work. I just can't do that." She



never raised hell with me again. Other people said, “Yes, Mrs. Auerbach, yes, Mrs. Auerbach.” So, she respected people who took a position. But all I can tell you is that she had compassion and understanding for everybody.

BS: How about for other women? She was a woman and she said, “From the head up, like a man.” Did she have women working there and what positions?

IN: Yes. As a matter of fact, she had a woman merchandiser – let me go beyond that woman. She had a woman called Töbe, and they had a fashion business, and they’re still in business in New York, and they would advise stores as to the current fashions, what’s to be done, and so on. She had that, and she was very friendly with Töbe. She would have Töbe come to the store once a month and go through the store with her, because she wanted to compare herself to Bloomingdales and B. Altman at that time. Maybe Lord & Taylor. What do I have that’s right, what do I have that’s wrong? And Töbe would walk through and tell her that. She also had a fashion woman – her name was Estelle Hamberger – a long time ago – who would sit with the advertising people and give a New York feeling to what we’re doing. I attended a meeting in Boston on some retailers. “Mr. Neimark, I’m not interested in Boston. I want you to go to New York. That’s where my focus is.” So, women buyers – as a matter of fact, in those days, most of the apparel buyers were women. Very astute.

BS: Let’s continue.

IN: You talk about why she was admired. She was very observant.

Example: When I got to the store and became a Divisional

Merchandiser Manager, I went to her after six weeks and said, “I’m here for six weeks, but all I’m doing is gopher work for Mr. Einstein, and you’re wasting your money and I’m wasting my time,” as nicely as I knew how to say it. I mean, why should I leave a great job that I have in Providence to come here to carry papers? She said, “I’ve been thinking about that, and you’re right. And what I’ve decided to do is I’m going to give you a group of departments.” So, in the book I said, “Like Solomon, dividing the baby in half.” She said, “I’m going to give you the Lingerie Department,” which the woman who ran it didn’t want, “the Piece Goods Department,” which nobody wanted. She gave me all these odd departments, including women’s foundations. I said, “Okay, that wasn’t much to work with,” but I would prove that I could make these departments go. And I did, modestly speaking. I said to her – “You know, the Foundation Department -- you have merchandise there that’s over two years old.” And the Foundation business, as long as the merchandise is boxed, you are allowed to return it. You shouldn’t do that. That would not be – I said, “Mrs. Auerbach, every retailer does that and the market understands it, and we should return it and clean the stock up.” She said, “If you think so, go ahead.” By the way, she said I noticed that buyer has a lunch date every day with another manufacturer. In other words, the buyer was having the manufacturers’ schedules, and they were taking her to lunch, which she didn’t like. “Not on my money,” she’d say. But she watched everything. She saw everything. I must say, one of the greatest pleasures I had in my whole retail career was every Saturday, I would have the podium on the floor, and I’d tell the Floor Manager, “Go away.” And the reason the Floor Manager had to

watch – he had to make sure every customer was taken care of. And the buyers ought to be on the floor to take care of it. Buyers even had to have sales books to make sure that they were taking care of customers. So, that was the dedication. So, I would tell the floor managers to go someplace else, give me your podium, and I would take the sales reports and have each buyer come to the podium on the floor, and the buyer would say, “This is selling, this isn’t selling,” and I’d give direction what I think they should do, mutually. I’d be ready Monday morning to go to the City. And she thought that was great. But more important to me, that was most likely the one point of my career where I was able to give direct direction to people. “Here’s what’s selling,” and I’d have tremendous results. The sales in my department really took off, and the divisionals who resented my being appointed GMM finally realized that I had merchandising ideas and thinking that they never had – they were home-grown while I was exposed to broader thinking. And one of the best things was, there was a little old buyer of daytime dresses. His name was Sam Borr. Sam had been there for easily forty or fifty years. We sat, and I showed him the system that I had developed, of how you decide how much inventory, to have and when. And Sam became the greatest opponent of it, and he told Mrs. Auerbach he learned more in six months with me than he learned the six years before that. And she loved it. And that type of merchandising, bringing to that store, which had great tradition, but really was not modern. Other stores moved to computers for merchandise information – they were using IBM. “I don’t want to be the first. I want to be the best.”

BS: One question that I'm not sure I quite understand. In 1965, when the May Company took over, and she essentially sold to them, I guess, their stock – what role did she play between 1965 and 1968, at the time of her death?

IN: Very good question. I'm going to give it a little thought because I'm sort of saying the same thing I said here. Mrs. Auerbach – the same as other retailers, without mentioning names – would not, in my opinion, as I easily believe when a major company came over we were going to merge, it meant if you take the money they paid and the stock they gave you and put it in the bank, and you're going to run your own business. It may be good the first six weeks. But shortly after that, the company comes in with their management to ask, "Why can't we do this, and why can't we do that?" As a matter of fact, as I heard the story from her later, that Stanley Goodman had another GMM of one of his stores that he wanted to bring to G. Fox. And fortunately for me, BFA being one of the largest stockholders at that point said, "No, Neimark stays here." I could have gone on to something else. And she nixed that idea. So, she ran the store the way she wanted to. Step-by-step, they moved in and changed this and changed that and changed this.

SAS: What would be some of the things that got changed in the first year, for instance?

IN: I think expense might have been one, where she had – she was caring so much about service that expense was a secondary consideration. Where in a corporate entity, it would be the first consideration. Interfering with how are you going to buy this – it wasn't an independent store. We have the same thing happen – in the book, I

explain the Stanley Marcus merge with Neiman Marcus with the Broadway Stores. It eventually became Carter Hawley Hale. And Bergdorf Goodman also sold to Broadway Stores. But he, Stanley Marcus, in my opinion, and Andrew Goodman and Beatrice Auerbach said, “We’re going to continue running our stores.” Well, that wasn’t to be. So, they all wanted to know – why did they want these stores so badly if they’re going to change them. They weren’t aware that the people who bought them saw a great potential. However, the down side is Hartford, Connecticut – downtown – as you know, deteriorated badly. Her bet was that it would continue to be a great metropolis, and in the process, having a store one square block, she would dominate the area. Unfortunately, she was wrong. The city – as you know better than I – has deteriorated to a very sad situation. May Company was in the branch store business. G. Fox was not. I understand she once had a branch store of farm equipment that didn’t work, so she said, “No branch stores.” I said I could make the business work downtown without branches or with branches, if downtown maintained a vigorous business community. And, unfortunately, it didn’t. They opened the first branch, and – back to your other question – opened their first branch store in Waterbury. She was really distraught. “Why do I want to be in a blue collar neighborhood like Waterbury when I want middle, upper class people which they didn’t have in Waterbury?” That she was unhappy about. It was the management style of May Company which eventually, in my opinion, is why Macys was able to buy them just in the past year. So, the privately owned stores, under the directorship of major chains, lost their identity. G. Fox lost its identity. G. Fox’s policy was if

there was a blizzard, and we had a blizzard – this was after she died – and the boys asked, “Shall we keep the store open?” I’d keep the store open. Why? Beatrice Auerbach had a philosophy. This store is here for the customer. If they want one thing, I’m open. We closed.  
[laughs]

BS: [closed]

IN: The policy was if a customer wanted to return a spool of thread, the great G. Fox fleet would pick up the thread. When I first got there – we had just bought our new home on Belknap Road, and I couldn’t wait to get the grass seed and the spreader. The grass seed arrived, but no spreader. I called and in the next hour a motorcycle came out with a spreader. Not because of me – that’s how they were. They took care of the customer. So, when Macys opened in New Haven, and we had a lot of customers in New Haven, she said, “Make sure we deliver within the same timeframe that Macys does so a customer doesn’t have to say, ‘I can’t get it at G. Fox.’” Very, very competitive.

BS: When you first came to Hartford, what was the city like, and how much change was there in the years?

IN: It was fabulous. Providence, actually, was going down. And I was not unhappy about leaving, but you talk about the City on the Hill. I mention here that Jackie and I drove down the Merritt at five o’clock in the afternoon. The sun was setting over Hartford. We had the Eroica Symphony on the radio, and we just knew this was right. And we drove into town, and – was it the Hilton Hotel?

BS: Yes, there was a Hilton.

IN: We saw a big, black limousine, and Beatrice Auerbach dressed formally, and three or four people in black tie they were having a party, and we just knew this was going to be great. The city had just begun building the new Center – the insurance building – in Downtown Hartford. And luckily, as I said earlier, if we found a home on Belknap Road, which was a former golf course – the Governor of Connecticut, Abraham Ribicoff, was right there, who we got to know. So, Hartford was in a resurgence. The buildings were new, the insurance companies expanding. The city was just great, and the traffic in the store – on a day like the day of Thanksgiving, I could be sitting in her office, looking out the window, sitting at my desk, and she's berating me for some damn thing or another. Always did. But she was right. And I'm looking at the cars coming over the bridge. I don't know what bridge that is, from East.

BS: The Founders Bridge.

IN: Cars coming in, back to back, into Hartford to shop. If the weather was bad, people couldn't go to the beach, the city was mobbed. So, we had all kinds of traffic in the store. It was a magnet. And then, after I left – I left there in 1969 – the city was still okay, but I think just about then is when it began coming apart. And we didn't go back very often. We lived in New York. I'd go back to play golf. It was a great city in those days, and I loved it. But that said Providence has come back up as a very 'with it' city, and Hartford is in pretty bad shape.

BS: They're trying. [laughs]

SAS: We may be at the beginning of a resurgence for Hartford.

IN: It could very well be. There aren't too many what I call a coastal city -- it's on a river -- that eventually it will come back. It has all the physical attributes, and I think it will come back.

BS: You mentioned the magnet for traffic at the store. There is a story that she worked to re-route the interstate.

IN: That's true.

BS: Could you talk about that?

IN: Well, I don't know -- I just got there when that happened. But I think it's I-91 went this way, and her garage was over this way, and she made sure that the powers that be that she was under a direct traffic area. She had a lot of influence.

BS: Do you have much -- any first-hand --?

IN: No. That's when I just got there. When I just got there, as a matter of fact -- if this table represented the space that G. Fox had, this whole corner here was a parking lot. And then she had that expanded to have the whole block. Which, frankly, looking back now, for a city in decline, it was not the thing to do. But that's how it is.

BS: Let's see if there's anything that we want to cover on her. You have been referring to a book, but the tape doesn't know the book, so can you -- it's Crossing Fifth Avenue to Bergdorf Goodman, and it's a book that will be coming out -- we're recording on September 18, 2006 -- you say it's supposed to come out in November.

IN: It will come out in November.

BS: Can you tell us a little about that book?

IN: Yes. At one point, my oldest granddaughter asked me -- she was fifteen or sixteen at that point -- why is 721 so significant in our lucky numbers, and when we use it on our license plates, and all of that. I



explained to her – I wrote a letter and explained to her that in 1938, as I mentioned earlier, I had to go to work. And I was fortunately sent to a store – Bonwit Teller – at 721 Fifth Avenue, and I was there for that – when I wrote to her, I was there for that period, and then, luckily, I was kept on, and I then said, “This is how my retail career started.” But after I finished writing the letter, I kept on writing because I had – I’m sure you do, too – I had total recall of practically every instance of anything important that happened to me at Bonwit Teller. So, I kept writing stories, and I wrote about Bonwit’s as a buyer, and I kept writing these stories as I recalled, including – , there was a woman called Bea Traub, who was the head shopper, and her son was Marvin Traub, who became the President of Bloomingdale’s, and she would tell me during the day that Marvin – how well he was doing at Harvard, and how I was going to Columbia at night. And Marvin and I became fierce but friendly competitors later on.

But in any case, I kept writing these stories about Bonwit Teller, and how I moved to Providence, about the management there. And then I wrote how I moved from Providence to Hartford, and wrote that story. Then, when I wrote about New York, Jackie – very fortunately, Jackie, over the twenty years – when I retired – well, when I got here in 1969 until when I retired in 1992 – she kept putting newspaper articles from the New York Times, Women’s Wear Daily, and the wall Street Journal in the box, and she had a box with hundreds of articles about her and my involvement with B. Altman and Bergdorf Goodman with and photographs.

BS: [laughs]

IN: So, I then took those articles she had, and I wrote stories about the articles. So, between the total recall of my early career and the article Jackie had – I'll show you some of them here – the book came about, and it kept going from two hundred pages to two-fifty. It's now three hundred, and I hope it's finished. The publisher said I should put something else in, but I don't know if I'm going to do it. So, the book arrived. So everyone said, "What's it going to be about?" I said, "It's really a memoir," but I was smart enough – or lucky enough – to put in what is called 'Lessons Learned.' And all through the book, at the end of each chapter, I have 'Lessons Learned' – whatever they may be. I don't know if this is a good one. After this particular chapter, Lesson Learned: "It's sometimes wise to accept a reduction of salary or position if it leads to a greater opportunity." That's true. I was a door boy, and I was making seventeen dollars a week, and I was making twenty dollars a week in tips, and I made fifty dollars during the Depression at Christmas. They said, "We want to move you to the office boy," and I came and I told my mother and I said, "Can you imagine?" Take that job, you'll learn something. So, I took a reduction. I think they gave me a dollar raise – eighteen dollars. My point is, all through the books, there are 'Lessons Learned.'

Salespeople can tell a Bestseller before the buyers. They can, in most cases, tell what isn't going to be an easy sell, and it can also tell you what price will sell for – and buyers don't have salespeople. The salespeople know. And the boss said, "If you have the salespeople on your side, you will succeed. If the salespeople are not, you'll increase your chances of failure." So, to answer your question, with all of that in here, it made an interesting book. For instance,

when I was a stock boy, there was a handbag sale in 1940. It stayed in my mind all these years because the alligators and lizards, at that point, were seven dollars and eighty-five cents. They would be seven hundred and eighty dollars today! But I remember coming to the floor from the stockroom – I had to come through this door or this door, and there were people waiting to grab the stuff out of my arms! Anyway, I asked Arthur Salzburger, could he find it for me, and they reproduced the ad to make a point of the stock boy recognizing that that's how they're going to sell. So, after Jackie did all of that – and at Bergdorf's it's an example. I installed escalators. [showing photograph] This was an picture of two very important Italian designers. That's Leonard Lauter, who now is the head of the company, and that's Jackie. All these photographs – I took them to the Times and Women's Wear, and they sold me the photographs from the clippings that she had cut out. Henry Kissinger was at the party. Oscar de la Renta, Bill Blass, Jackie Onassis, President Carter, Governor Carey, Geoffrey Beene – all the stuff that's in here, going back to the fact that Jackie saved it. Total recall, plus the clippings – the book came about. And I'm very proud of it because people are interested in fashion. And this explains how, in Beatrice Auerbach's day, the designers would get on their hands and knees, as to where can you put us in the store, and what space can you give us? And twenty years later, a designer says, "I want this space, this size, otherwise forget it." And the retailer says, "Yes, sir!"

BS: [laughs]

IN: The whole thing has reversed itself, if that will help you.

SAS: You said you had some other things to show us.

BS: But I have a question before we look at that. Your appointment as CEO at Bergdorf Goodman – how did that come about? I don't think we got to that.

IN: You're asking some good questions. Very interesting. I was working away as the GMM – I mentioned about B. Altman, how Beatrice Auerbach asked me to take him through, and we developed a relationship. And B. Altman was very much liked G. Fox. And I loved it, and was having a good time developing it. The head of Women's Wear when I left said, "You moved it one inch." I said, "What do you mean you moved it one inch?" He said, "You moved the Sphinx an inch, you've accomplished something. This is a very conservative store."

Anyway, one day Leonard Lauter called me to have lunch. He said, "Are you happy at B. Altman?" I said, "Yes, I am happy." Then I hesitated. I said, "Well, am I not supposed to be happy?" He said, "Ed Carter and Phil Hawley would like to talk to you about Bergdorf Goodman. Would you be interested?" I said, "Yes, I would be interested." I was interested for a couple of reasons. One, I had a hunch that B. Altman, at some point, would be sold. And I didn't want to be in the same position that I was at G. Fox, that somebody comes in and says, "Who are you?" Two, I've always loved the specialty store business. And three, equally, if not more important, being at Bonwit Teller on this side of Fifth Avenue and Bergdorf's on that side of the Fifth Avenue, I knew the kind of customer and the traffic that was in this area. I was very familiar with it. And where many people turned down Bergdorf's to buy it – they said, "You can't make any money here" – I felt this store can be an oil well or a gold

mine. So, to answer your question, when Phil Hawley asked if I would take it, I said, “Yes, I would.” The problem was like Beatrice Auerbach, Andrew Goodman sold the business, and in the book I mentioned he sold it for eleven million dollars, and guaranteed a million-dollar-income a year. That’s increased quite a bit. He had to be sure that someone coming in – he would approve of him. So, I went to talk to him and got approval to take the store over. But, I said, “It’s not going to be the store you had.” And, I must say, at the very beginning, the Goodman Family were very unhappy with the changes I began putting into the store. Because they had been on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 58<sup>th</sup> Street for many, many years. Andrew was the second family member. And the store only got as high as thirty-eight million dollars a year, just by – look at Bendel’s on 57<sup>th</sup> Street, and it’s going like a house on fire, and Bloomingdale’s expanding, and Saks – and we’re just sitting here. The attitude was, “Well, I don’t want to be the richest man in the cemetery. We didn’t make money in 1970, but we’ll be okay.”

Well, now that the store was doing two hundred and fifty million, and men’s store was doing forty million, now, I believe, the figure of the women’s store is close to three hundred and fifty to four hundred million, and the men’s store is close to sixty. So, the total would be five hundred million very soon, which is quite a bit from thirty-eight million.

SAS: What kinds of changes did you make?

IN: Basically, the store did not have the designers who were coming in at that point. I showed you the picture of Fendi here. Fendi was a hot designer. So, with my Fashion Director, Dawn Mello, and my wife

Jackie was convinced – ready to come to the store. We convinced Armani – we convinced all these fashion designers that we are the store. Bendel’s is too small. Bloomingdale’s is too big. Like the three bears, we’re just the right size.

BS: [laughs]

SAS: [laughs]

IN: And we got them to come in. We renovated the store. And, the fact is, today – if you go to the city today, you will find on a day like today, Bergdorf is mobbed – absolutely mobbed. Busy. Because anyone with money – not necessarily taste – but money. They will go, and Bergdorf’s is where you have to be. So, by putting this company, as we call it – the correct mix – the critical mass is the word we use. The critical mass of designers. Once we got to a point with Armani and Fendi and Yves Saint Laurent, then the thing began to turn around. Then people said, “How do we get to Bergdorf’s?” And it became the number one fashion retailer. So, it turned out to be a great success for everybody. Very impressive.

BS: And when you left in 1992, this was just a natural retirement period, in terms of age and whatever?

IN: Oh, yes. What happened was they were very nice. When I was sixty-five they said, “How long do you want to work?” I thought, “Well, seventy looks like a nice number.” So, I picked seventy as when I would retire, and I retired about a month after my seventieth birthday. I had different companies like Hermes of Paris, would I be able to be on their Board, to be an advisor? And in Tokyo – Mitsukoshi, would I be their advisor? And any number of companies that I became advisor or on their Boards. Just as long as it didn’t take me seven

days a week. At G. Fox, you were there – the store was closed on Monday, but you went to work on Monday to do all your paperwork. And you would have Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, and Thursday night and Friday and Saturday. Jackie and my daughters were grown women now – I remember every Saturday she'd take them to some restaurant because Daddy's working. And the same thing Thursday night – she'd take them to buy pizza. But you didn't ask questions. You worked! You were there. As a matter of fact, I heard a story, which I don't like to put in, but one day she went to a football game, and the Display Director was sitting there. She wondered why wasn't he in the store, working? I'm not sure it's true, but that was the feeling of it.

BS: Okay. Just a couple of other wrap-up questions. One has to do with – you said that you dropped out of high school in the Depression, in 1938. But then you talked about going to school at Columbia in the evenings.

IN: Yes.

BS: Did you go back to school?

IN: In effect, yes. What happened – I dropped out of day school at Erasmus Hall High School, which was a wonderful high school, in my second year because – well, a couple reasons. One, I was doing quite well in – as a matter of fact, to go back a bit, I was a very reluctant student in public schools, but I got to the seventh grade -- and being a teacher, you'd appreciate this – my teacher, Mrs. Shriner, went around the room and she asked each student their name. And when she came to me I said, "My name is Ira Neimark." She said, "Oh, you must be Lester's brother," who had just graduated. "He was a wonderful

student. I'm sure you'll be, too." Whoops! So, I became the President for seventh grade. In eighth grade, I was Valedictorian for that graduating class. I went to Erasmus, and I did very well in the first year and the second year, but I was doing so well they advanced me into math. And they advanced me too fast, and I got lost. Then, in Latin -- if someone in the family was going to be a lawyer, like you're my father, you had to take Latin. I said in the book, "Mistake." I got lost in Latin. I thought, "I'm wasting my time." So, I went to work, and Erasmus had a night school, so I went to night school at Erasmus. However, I will admit to you I did not graduate at that point. At Bonwit Teller they had a scholarship fund, and that scholarship fund -- they sent me to Columbia Business School at night. Now, after the war, the credits I got for the war, I attended the University of Hawaii for a while, and this and this -- to get a diploma in 1948. So, I'm really kidding all my friends I'm ten years younger than they all are.

BS: Night school?

IN: Yes. Erasmus Hall finally gave my diploma to me. However, Columbia -- through some people -- asked if I would mind lecturing as an adjunct professor and a retailer in marketing? I was thrilled, obviously -- retail marketing. I did it for two years -- 1983 and 1984. My big disappointment was that the students were more interested in Wall Street than they were in retailing.

BS: Huh.

IN: There were two things that you might appreciate -- or, I hope you appreciate. I said, "When the class starts, it starts at five o'clock. The door is closed at five o'clock. You're either there on time, or you're not there. You don't bring coffee in. You drink coffee outside.



Anyone that wants to talk – you go to the podium, I sit down.” They looked at me like nobody had ever told them that before! I invited them – I said, “Anyone that wants to meet a principle of any retail store in the city, I can arrange the appointment.” That was a disappointment. They wanted to go to Wall Street. Now, at F.I.T. – the Fashion Institute – I also became a lecturer there for the undergraduate students. So, when I’m sitting there I said, “Okay, please tell the girls they have to wear proper dress – sportswear or proper dress. And the boys have to wear a jacket and tie, otherwise I’m not going to be here. So, a hundred kids would walk in and sit down glowering and say, “Who is this guy?” Relax. Within six months, you’re going to be working for a company. If you’re a genius, you don’t have to worry about anything at all, but I haven’t met many geniuses lately, and the boss is going to expect you – since you come to fashion school – to look proper. After a while, you can wear what you want. No one ever told them before. I spoke to the Dean. Tell them before they graduate, not after.

BS: [laughs]

IN: You tell them the first day! Not the last day! So, that was my experiences. I only had two years at Columbia. I liked it, but I think students – and I’d like your comment – I think students to get MBAs – students were there more to get the MBA than they were to get the education. That was my reaction to it.

SAS: How long did you stay at F.I.T.?

IN: Oh, this only happened – I’d say – four or five years. Not staying there, but lecturing each year, to the students. And I always had the same story. As a matter of fact, I said at the end, “Anyone that wants

a job” – this is F.I.T. – “at Bergdorf Goodman, I’ll get you a job selling, because no matter what you do in the retail business, you’ve got to sell!” Nobody wanted it.

BS: Finally, I wanted to ask – going back to Beatrice Fox Auerbach – if you had to sum-up what you learned from her in a sentence or two, what would that be? What was the critical thing that you learned from her?

IN: This is quick – service and integrity. The customer – they don’t know it today. I can’t show you the letter I wrote this retailer, but they don’t understand – I have on my TV. set a thing called Movie Beam. I read about it in the paper. Sears Roebuck had it. I went to Sears Roebuck on a Sunday afternoon with Jackie. It’s tough to get there, the traffic is crazy. I saw the sign that said ‘Movie Beam.’ Terrific. I called the salesman. He said, “Well, I don’t know if they have it in stock. I’ll call a manager.” I don’t want to talk to a manager. I want to talk to the manager of the store! How can you have people who have to call the company for information? I went to Circuit City a couple of weeks ago and what I wanted to find – I couldn’t find a salespeople. I’m sure you have the same experience.

BS: Yes.

IN: So, basically, her integrity was beyond question. And service – no matter if it was a black customer, a white customer, any customer. If you get this, then you’re allowed to go to the book and put it into your history.

BS: I wanted to ask, finally, is there anything we didn’t ask that you think we should have asked?

IN: Well, the point I want to make is that I wrote – I’m not going to give this to you because I can’t – I said we started on page – on this book, which is three hundred pages now, including photograph – we started on page seventy-one, where Bill Holmes asked me to wait while he placed a few calls. First he called the President of Bloomingdale’s Jeb Davidson, who, I said, wasn’t there at the moment. Next he called Beatrice Fox Auerbach, the owner of G. Fox & Company in Hartford. That starts on page seventy-one, and the mention of G. Fox goes through one hundred six.

BS: Okay, well, we’ll take a look at that.

IN: So, when that comes out, I think it will be very helpful. It tells you pretty much what I said.

BS: Okay. Well, we thank you very much. We will be looking at material that Mr. Neimark has.

IN: Let me tell you something important, first. When Jackie’s father had a small store in Providence – it was like a Mark Cross, only the best quality. Beatrice Fox would always say, “If it’s good for G. Fox, I’m for it.” Whenever we talked about something. So, Jackie’s father had this made, and you can have this – she had one and I had one.

SAS: It says, “If it’s good for G. Fox & Company” –

IN: That was her motto.

BS: So, this is a name tag?

SAS: Right.

End of Interview