

Interview with: Maxwell Dane

at: 437 Madison Avenue

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by: Laura Strauss

LS: I think we'll start off by talking about your early years --where you were born and when .

MD: Where? Cincinnati, Ohio --right across from Newport, Kentucky, where we moved at a very early age . I went to elementary and high school in Newport, Kentucky. That probably accounts for my Kentucky -Ohio accent.

LS: What was your parents' background?

MD: Both my parents were immigrants . They had come from what was then Russia in the early part of this century. My father, like many other immigrants, came a year or two before my mother. I think my father came around 1902 or 1903; my mother, a year or so later. By occupation, he was a coppersmith

LS : Why did your parents leave Europe?

MD: The same reason everyone else did: the streets were paved with gold, of course , in the United States. He had friends in New York, as I guess every immigrant did, who encouraged him to come. When he came, I assume, the job opportunities were not here. And he drifted to Cincinnati, where a previous immigrant friend was residing.

LS: And what was the year when you were born?

MD : 1906--a long time ago

LS: Can you remember anything about the house where you spent your very early childhood?

MD: I can remember a good deal about the house. As I said, it was located in Newport. It was a two-story house. One of the things I remember about it was, in 1913 , the Ohio River

had one of its floods, one of its highest floods .

There was another river that joins the Ohio River at that point--the Licking River--they both come together at Newport and Cincinnati . And the rivers rose so high that, while we were probably a half-mile or a mile away from the rivers , it came half-way up our first floor. And I remember the work my father had to do when the floods receded, and he had to get rid of all of the mud in the downstairs floor and in the basement. But as a child, it was kind of interesting. You didn't have to go to school. It was in the spring, I'm quite sure. You had rowboats coming down the main street throwing packages of food to the flood victims, so at least we didn't starve .

LS: Was this a rural setting?

MD: No, not a rural setting. Newport had at that time a population of around 30,000 . In subsequent years, long after we left, it became the den of gambling iniquity , but we had departed long before that. So it wasn't a rural setting. It was really a suburban setting--a suburb of Cincinnati, right across the Ohio River.

LS: Did you have brothers and sisters?

MD: Two sisters, both younger, one still living. The youngest, ironically, was the first to die. She died about fifteen years ago. And my sister lives in New York , too .

LS: Were there many Jews in Newport?

MD: There weren ' t many , in percentage of population. But in our particular area, there were a number of Jewish families. I know there were several neighbors on our street who were Jewish. One was the local plumber, Sam Farber . There was another family named Greenstein. I remember them. Most of the people on our block were not Jewish. But it had a fairly sized Jewish community. Some of the retail stores--the jewelry store in the center of town was owned by a Jewish family, friends of ours; the small shoe store in the area was also owned by a Jewish family . Many of the early Jewish settlers in America went into retailing--from peddling to retailing . And of course some of the most prominent Jewish families started as peddlers through the South. The Lehmans , for one , and some other well-known Jewish families.

LS : Was Jewishness important in your household? What was its place in your family life?

MD: I hate to be disillusioning, but my father was not a religious Jew. He never went to synagogue. Whether it was his experiences in Russia that caused it, or whatever it was , he was not a religious man and he never went to shul. My mother , I suppose as a result, was not religious either. So I was not brought up in a household where the Jewish traditions were being observed, even though they both, of course, spoke with a very decided Jewish accent. And the usual language at home during my childhood was Yiddish.

LS: So you were aware that you were Jewish?

MD: Not only were you aware that you were Jewish, but I think that as a child you were kind of ashamed by the fact that your parents didn't speak English as well as many of the neighbors , because this was not a Lower East Side , where everyone pretty much spoke the same language. As a child you probably were a little conscious of the fact that your parents were different from many of the other parents in the community. So , like it or not , you knew that you were Jewish. And every once in a while, you would run into some anti-Semitic word. I'm not sure whether the word "kike" was ever used, but I wouldn't be surprised if it were. If there was anti-Semitism, it was not apparent to me as a child.

LS: Tell me about your early education. You went across the river to school?

MD: Oh, no. Newport had elementary schools and high schools. It wasn't the early wilderness , believe me.

I still remember my first-grade teacher. I don't remember most of the others, but I remember her : a stout, Irish woman named Miss Quinn. She had a first name , but whoever remembered that? She told stories that opened our eyes . We never heard stories like the ones she told. One time she invited my sister and me to visit her at home, which was a great event--to be invited by the school teacher to visit . We went to the public schools in Newport; high school as well. Around the midpoint, my father's work had pretty well dried up and he decided that our future lay in New York. So around 1923 or thereabouts , we moved back to New York. Our first address was at 104th Street and Madison Avenue. So my full-time formal education ended at around that time. We came here in mid-term. And I got a job with a newspaper representative--errand boy, mail room, call it what you will. But it was a well-paying job: \$12 a week! and that

wasn't to be sneezed at. I enjoyed the work. And I never went back to full-time school. So that started my career in advertising.

LS: Did you have any regrets about leaving school , or didn't it seem important?

MD: I enjoyed what I was doing, so it didn't occur to me. I went to night school and took courses pretty regularly . And I always did a good deal of reading. So, to some extent , you could call it self-education. But doesn' t everybody sort of self-educate himself?

LS : Did you have any sense that you can recall, at this point, of what you wanted to do with your life?

MD: I suppose I didn' t want to be a farmer or a conductor . My ambition at that time was to have a steady job, seeing that my father had had jobs and lost j obs . But at that time, if you could have a steady job and earn \$100 a week, you'd really be a rich man, you could live in great affluence . I think it was that ambition as much as anything else. I didn't know any more about advertising than I know today about nuclear science. But it was a job in an office , right in t his neighborhood , 342 Madison Avenue, the old Canadian Pacifi c building. It's still there.

LS: How did you get to work?

MD: I haven't any idea how I got to work . I suppose it was either by subway, if we lived at l04th Street, or l18th Street later on. It was probably the Lexington Avenue subway . Streetcars, maybe? I don't think I walked, but I got there .

LS : What first caught your imagination in the work process, that you recall?

MD: It had something to do with the printed word, which fascinated me. From mailroom and errand boy, I took some courses in shorthand. I learned typing by myself. And moved up to the job of secretary. In those days, there were quite a few male secretaries . I still think that's a good way to learn t he business, because you're often in association with heads of companies . And you have a chance to learn a good deal about the i nner workings of a company,which you don't have in many other jobs.

LS : How long did you stay with that company?

MD: Several years. And I felt I wasn't making enough progress. So I began looking around, and got a job as the secretary to the advertising manager of Stern Brothers department store. At that time, it was on 42nd Street. That was really my first job in advertising . And I learned

a great deal from him--Alan Wells, who had come there from Macy's . He was new on the job and we established a good relationship. I'd go through the store with him. We must have looked like a Mutt-and-Jeff couple, because he was about 6 ' 2" or 6'3", and I was 5'6" then (and I'm 5'6" now), so we made a strange pair. I learned a great deal about advertising from him. And eventually became the assistant advertising manager and had a chance to write copy and prepare ads , because in a department store, you get involved in many aspects of advertising. It isn' t that large a department . And you become aware of whether advertising brings results or not. You run an ad and the customers come in the next day or not. So you learn the effectiveness and value of advertising in the American economy .

LS: How old were you at about this time?

MD: By this time, I was in the twenties. And I stayed on there until around 1930, when the Depression had begun.

However , I decided at the end of 1932 t o go into business for myself. I quickly found that my sense of timing was horrible . I had a friend who was an artist--a very good furniture artist--and we had an idea for a syndicated furniture advertising service. I took a trip to Jamestown, New York, which then was one of the furniture centers in America; and to Grand Rapids, which was the Number One furniture center. After talking with manufacturers in those two citi es, I decided this was not time to go into business.

LS: Were you married at thi s point?

MD: Married? I ' d have to find a wife who could support me, wouldn't I? No. But it ' s interesting you raise that question. We did get married on April 4, 1933--when I was still groping for a paying job. And my wife didn't have a job either. President Roosevelt had just come into office and closed the banks. But we survived. In the summer of ' 33 , I went to work for the old New York Evening Journal in

the retail advertising promotion department. When I stop to think about it, I've outlived most of the firms for whom I worked: the representatives, Stern Brothers who moved out of New York, New York Evening Journal who ceased to publish. A couple of companies I worked for subsequently, such as Look Magazine and Dorland International, are also out of business. So I've outlasted them.

LS: What would your reflection be on why those businesses are not longer with us?

MD: I don't know. New York Evening Journal had the problems of most other big-city newspapers: costs were going up, broadcasting was beginning to come in, the economy was in poor shape. I didn't leave the Journal until 1937. And it was still publishing at that time, and continued for a number of years. But costs were rising, broadcasting was becoming very competitive, labor costs were very high, of course. Stern's Department Store--I don't know why. I think it was a bad location. Stern's had moved up from 23rd Street to 42nd Street. They thought that would be a fine central location. But they were off the beaten path. They were right across from Bryant Park and the Public Library. And there was very little traffic on those streets. Stern Brothers had to attract people unto itself, as opposed to, let us say, the 34th Street complex at that time, with Macy's, Gimbel's, Saks 34th Street; or the 14th Street complex of Ohrbach's, Klein's and other stores; and then the move onto Fifth Avenue by Altman's, Lord & Taylor, and Saks Fifth Avenue. So Stern's was away from the mainstream. That hurt them more than anything else. Stern Brothers is still in business, but not in New York City.

LS: At this point, were you aware that your future would be in advertising?

MD: I suppose so. By now, this was what I knew best. I had had ten-fifteen years of advertising experience. If I couldn't get a job in advertising, what was I going to look for? By the way, I'm still married and we celebrated our 51st anniversary earlier this month. And our son was 48 years old yesterday. And my grandson will be graduating Haverford College next month (the oldest grandson). We'll be there.

LS: Now, you are with the Journal and it hasn't closed yet.

MD: No , it didn't. As a matter of fact, with a change in publishers, I decided it was a good time to start looking for a better job. And I got a job with the New York Evening Post , which at t hat time was owned by David Stern. My title was promotion manager. A few months later, they ran into real financial difficulties (this was 1937) and I was called into the office of the executive vice president, and was told the newspaper had to cut back. I was the l ast one hired and first one out. So that was 1937.

LS: You had a child already?

MD: Yes , Henry was a year and a half old . So I had two mouths to feed, plus my own--I didn't want to starve either. So I began looking for another job. My parents didn't leave me any estate so I could just sit back and relax. r began looking around in the advertising agency field and I wound up with an agency called Dorland Internati onal. Also no longer in existence. I t seems, when I leave, at some point or other they go out of business [Laughs] We had a number of international accounts. Some that I remember: Harris tweed , Rolls razor, a bicycle account , handled the international advertising for companies like Packard cars (out of business), Kelloggs Food, and a number of other clients. There I had a dual job: account executive and copy chief . I wrote some of the copy and serviced some of the clients. In the summer of 1939, it was apparent t hat Europe was beginning to suffer and something could happen there with the advent of Hitler. Our company was beginning to feel the effects of business from foreign clients, and I began keeping my eyes open for another opportuni ty. And I £ound out that Look Magazine, which had started a year or two before , was looking for an advertising promotion

LS : I would love to hear your recollections of Look Magazine, as it was then.

MD: Recollections of Look? Remember, Life had started a couple of years earlier and had been a tremendous success. Look was, I think , a little more sensational than Life. It was founded by the Cowles family, who owned the Des Moines Register and Tribune. Their publication headquarters originally were in Des Moines. Eventually they moved to New York. but their advertising offices were already here in New York . It was an exciting experience. Circulation was soaring. I forget what our peak circulation was: 7-8 million circulation, or something of that sort. It was quite successful. But in 1939, Doyle left the magazine. And a successor came in. And he and I did not see eye to eye.And shortly after that , I was at liberty again. This must have been around 1941 , sometime in 1941 . I had become

a pretty expert job-hunter by this time. In 1941 , I got a job with radio station WHCA, which had just been bought by Edward J. Noble, who had made his fortune in Lifesavers and had been an Under Secretary of Commerce in some Administration (I forget which). He had bought the station from Donald Flomm. Subsequently, Noble bought the Blue Network, which he renamed the American Broadcasting Company. And WMCA was bought by Nathan Straus, in 1942 or '43. I was the advertising promotion manager at that time. One project I was involved in was persuading the New York Times to provide us with news bulletins every hour on the hour War had broken out and news was very important , but no station I know of was carrying hourly news bulletins. Every hour we had a three-minute news bulletin from the New York Times. It was very successful for the station and a real service to listeners. That arrangement ended when the New York Times decided to go into broadcasting and bought WQXR . In November, 1944, when the war was beginning to wind down,

I had not been drafted because of age--the local draft board did not call me until I was almost 38, and then decided that I was not indispensable . In November, 1944, I went into business under my own name, Maxwell Dane , Incorporated, in the Steinway Hall Building, 113 West 57th Street. My major clients were Hygrade Food Products, which was headed by Samuel Slotkin, who had worked his way up from a pushcart on the Lower East Side and was an important meat packer at that time. I had several publishers and handled radio advertising for a few retailers. And I was in business for myself. That was the beginning . About four and a half years later... I had remained friends with Ned Doyle. He and Bernbach were going to be leaving the Grey agency. And I suggested we make it into a three-way deal. The agency, Doyle Dane Bernbach started in business on June 1 , 1949. Bernbach is Jewish and Doyle is, of course, Irish. Many of our original accounts were headed by Jews. Ohrbach's was our major account at that time, headed by Nathan M. Ohrbach. Levy's bread was Whitey Rubin. A little later on, Stephen Klein of Barton's Jack Dreyfus of the Dreyfus Fund. We had other accounts as well . But these were some of our principal accounts. So that was the beginning Doyle Dane Bernbach at 350 Madison Avenue . When I think about it, about twenty-five years earlier I had started work in the advertising business just down the next block, at 342 Madison. And here I am, a few years later, at 431 Madison.

So I haven't gone very far : from 342 Madison to 437 Madison in almost sixty years. That isn't very far to go. I must have been moving very slowly

LS: I wonder if you have any particular favorites, when you think about some of the campaigns that you started in your own agency?

MD: There are any awful lot. Going back to the early days, I'd have to say that Nathan Ohrbach did give us an opportunity . The creative head of the agency was Bill Bernbach, right from the start, and we recognized that. In his own field, he was a genius and a forerunner of the present trends in advertising. We encouraged good creative people. We all agreed on that. But the entrepreneurs--whether it was a Nathan Ohrbach, or a Whitey Rubin, a Stephen Klein, a Jack Dreyfus--were willing to give us a relatively free hand. It was true of a number of our other clients, too. Favorite campaigns" ?

The Volkswagen campaign was certainly one that catapulted us to success. El Al Airlines, we did some tremendous advertising for them. Polaroid cameras in the early days--1952-53. Jack Dreyfus and his Dreyfus Fund with the Dreyfus lion going through the subway turnstile. There are so many that I have fond memories of. Incidentally, one of the things that amused me ... This matchbox (you don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's) was printed in Japan . . . Avis cars ("We're No. Two, we try harder")--certainly one of the favorite and highly regarded campaigns, the Volkswagen "Lemon" or "Small is beautiful" ads. At Doyle Dane Bernbach we put into effect a mandatory retirement program, and I retired twelve years ago without the slightest regret. I'm still on the board , on a couple of committees . I have a lovely office . And my secretary of many years. So I feel I ' ve got the best of both worlds : my freedom, my personal interests and modest participation in the agency of which I was a founder.