

Margaret Sanger

**Birth-Control Advocate,
1879-1966**

by David Rosen

On October 16, 1916, Margaret Sanger, together with her sister, Ethel Byrne, a nurse, and Fania Mindell, a receptionist who spoke Yiddish, opened the nation's first birth-control clinic on Amboy Street in Brownsville, Brooklyn.

For 10 days, the clinic served some 488 women in this predominantly immigrant, Jewish working-class neighborhood dispensing birth control literature, providing helpful information and supplying contraceptive devices (e.g., pessaries, condoms and douching solutions).

Sanger and Byrne were arrested for violating city and federal obscenity laws, dubbed Comstock laws after the greatest 19th century moralist, Anthony Comstock. Found guilty, the sisters each served 30-days in jail. She was imprisoned with prostitutes and drug addicts, and spent her time educating these women on birth control and other "women's issues."¹

Two years earlier, in August 1914, Comstock indicted Sanger for sending birth control information through the U.S. mail. Fearing a possible 45-year prison term, she fled to Europe to avoid the trial. During her absence, Comstock went to the Sanger home and, posing as a father seeking birth-control information, bought a pamphlet from Margaret's husband, William Sanger, and promptly arrested him; he served a month in jail.²

Sanger was born Margaret Louisa Higgins on September 14, 1879, to Irish-immigrant parents in Corning, NY; she died almost 88 years later on September 6, 1966. In her youth, she was one in struggle with radicals like Emma Goldman, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Havlock Ellis; in her maturity, she was on a first-name basis with world figures like Eleanor Roosevelt, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Mohandas Gandhi. Her life's trajectory defines the integration of birth control from the margin to the mainstream of social life.



Over the half-century she struggled for women's sexual freedom, her vision shifted becoming, as the historian David Kennedy observed, "from [promoting] a radical program of social disruption to a conservative program of social control."

In 1910, Sanger moved with her husband, an architect and artist, and their children from the placid suburbs of Westchester, NY, to the city. She plunged into the rich intellectual, cultural and political life of what Ann Douglas called "mongrel Manhattan."³ She joined the Socialist party; wrote columns for *The Call*, the radical publication of the day; and was a regular at Mabel Dodge's legendary salons. Others who attended these memorable get-togethers were political figures like John Reed and Bill Haywood, the artists Arthur Davis, Charles Demuth and Max Weber, and renowned intellectuals like Will Durant and A. A. Brill. Within such a

stimulating environment, the obligations of marriage and family became restraints on her desire to live a passionate life.

Sanger challenged the powerful traditionalist convention that a married mother without means (i.e., a rich husband or inherited wealth) should not lead an autonomous life, become a public figure separate and distinct from her husband. Fully exploiting the knowledge and experience gained as a nurse in Westchester, she became an articulate spokesperson on what was then called "women's issues," particularly family planning and birth control. Ellen Chesler, Sanger's principle biographer, evaluates the significance of her writing during this period:

For a woman to write about sex was especially provocative. To tackle such subjects as pregnancy and abortion, masturbation, menstruation, and defloration, the materials of Margaret's first forays as a columnist, demanded considerable courage, even though she took a traditional Victorian and conservative view of sexual excess, especially with respect to masturbation, which she condemned as harmful on the grounds that it made the experience of sexual gratification in conventional intercourse more difficult."⁴

She founded and edited *The Woman Rebel* and published two critical pamphlets, "What Every Girl Should Know" and "Family Limitation," that directly challenged U.S. obscenity laws. She was arrested in 1914 and, fearing a trial and possible imprisonment for up to 45 years, fled to Europe using a false passport.

Sanger drew inspiration for her birth-control clinic from two sources -- efforts underway in Europe to establish socialized public health clinics and the U.S. network of some 500 tuberculosis clinics. She found support from neighborhood women and

progressives. However, the city's traditionalists, police and medical community railed against her. Serving a 30-day sentence for violating state Comstock laws, she was imprisoned with prostitutes and drug addicts. She spent her time educating these women on birth control and other "women's issues."

Her 1916 arrest took place amidst the mounting hysteria that accompanied U.S. entry into World War I. The war caused a fundamental schism within the progressive community. Some of Sanger's circle supported the war effort, but many, most notably Emma Goldman, stood in pacifist opposition to U.S. involvement. Sanger took a third course, claiming neutrality. She knew the war would end and was determined to place a woman's right to birth control on the political agenda, no matter the polarizing positions it engendered. Sanger's compromise would guide her efforts during the subsequent decades of her long and distinguished life.

Sanger's neutrality allowed her to escape the right-wing revenge executed during the postwar Red Scare that targeted the most radical progressives. While the Palmer Raids and the subsequent deportations of radicals (including her oldest comrade-in-arms and rival for influence, Goldman) were underway, Sanger organized the nation's first birth-control conference. Held in 1921, it drew distinguished guests such as Winston Churchill and Theodore Dreiser as well as many medical and academic dignitaries. As Chesler notes, "The conference reestablished Margaret as the country's preeminent spokeswoman for birth control."⁵

Sanger attempted to reconcile political belief with practical action. Birth control not only provided a woman with greater power over her life — her body and her pregnancy — but also

provides a means by which she could experience greater erotic pleasure, an experience separate from procreation. Sanger's political activism and intellectual forcefulness were matched by a strong sexual passion. She advocated for sexual freedom and also practiced it. She appears to have really enjoyed sexual relations with her husbands as well as affairs, if not of the flesh than of the mind, with some of the leading intellectuals of her day, including Ellis, H. G. Wells and Lorenzo Portet.* Her relationship with (and subsequent marriage to) Noah Slee, a millionaire manufacturer, started in 1921 (while still married) while organized her first U.S. birth control conference. With its success and her marriage to Slee, she abandoned both her radical socialist roots and sexual liaisons outside of marriage as well. As Chesler describes it, the marriage deteriorated into a sad, bitter relationship as the stock market crash and Depression destroyed Slee's fortune and selfhood. As her marriage failed, her sexuality was rekindled and she once again found sexual intimacy with a man other than her husband.⁶

In 1930, Sanger provoked one of the 20th century's major confrontations over a woman's right to birth control materials, this time as a free speech issue. She "illegally" imported Japanese condoms, a violation of the Comstock laws. In 1936, the Supreme Court, in *U.S. v One Package of Japanese Pessaries*, struck down the prohibition because the material, as information and devices, served medical purposes, protecting the

* Portet was a disciple of Francisco Ferrer, Spain's leading reformer and educator who was assassinated by Spanish monarchists in 1909. Sanger may well have had a homo-erotic encounter with Janet de Selincourt, the wife of one of her lovers, Hugh de Selincourt. [Chesler, 186.]

patient's life. During the following two decades, and especially among WW-II servicemen stationed away-from-home or overseas, condoms became the principle means to prevent catching a sexually transmitted disease (STD) and to regulate birth control.

Like many other fundamental technological innovations, the Pill had both "progressive" and "regressive" consequences. Progressively, it helped women gain better control over their bodies and pregnancies; it also helped facilitate the '60s sexual revolution involving the counter-cultural, feminist and gay-rights movements of the '60s and '70s. Regressively, Sanger – along with many leaders of the birth control and environmental conservation movements of the period – supported postwar eugenics. Birth control advocates backed U.S. government anti-Soviet family-planning aid to "underdeveloped," 3rd-world countries, most notably India.

In 1950 and at age 71, Sanger now lived in Tucson, AZ, and decided not to attend the Planned Parenthood Foundation's 13th annual meeting at the city's Roosevelt Hotel. She asked her son, Dr. Grant Sanger, to deliver her message. As reported in the *Times*, she urged the "sterilization of feeble-minded and victims of transmissible, congenital diseases. " Sanger's message was intended to "save innocent children from the cruelty of being born to such parents."⁷

Sanger represents what can best be described as the "liberal" wing of the eugenics movement. Her most recent biographer, Jonathan Eig, author of *Birth of the Pill*, argues, "Sanger and McCormick were both elitists, to be sure, and they grew more elitist as they got hold and wealthier, but there's little reason to believe either one of them was racist." He goes on to define her position:

Sanger never joined the eugenicists who argued that rich, educate, white people should be encouraged to have *more* children. Nor did she single out race when she identified people who she felt ought to be having fewer children. ... Race never seemed to be the driving factor in her deliberations.⁸

The eugenics represented by Sanger reflected three interlinked factors. First, it was based on a genuine belief that women needed better control over their pregnancies. Second, it sought to address one of the great dilemmas of the postwar era, alleged over population, "the population bomb." Third, it became a core component of U.S. Cold War foreign policy, backed by the government and leading foundations. These factors influenced the ultimate acceptance of the Pill that followed FDA approval in 1960.

Also in 1950, Sanger came to New York to attend an intimate dinner party at the Park Avenue apartment of Dr. Abraham Stone, director of the Margaret Sanger Research Bureau; his deceased wife, Hannah Stone, had been a long-time birth control advocate. She returned to the city to meet one of the other guests, Gregory Pincus, a Harvard University Ph. D. biologist and a pioneering fertility researcher. As Pincus later recalled, "she asked, "Gregory, can't you devise some sort of pill for this purpose [birth control]?" I said I'd try."⁹ A decade later, in May 1960, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the first simple-to-use, full-proof and safe oral contraceptive method, "the Pill." It changed New York and the U.S. in ways the woman rebel never anticipated.

For more information:

Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth of the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

* Bulloch and Eig report the dinner took place in 1950; Tone reports it took place in 1951.

Notes:

¹ [Tone/107]

² Chesler, pp. 65-66.

³ Chesler

⁴ Chesler/200

⁵ Chesler/

⁶ [Chesler/349

⁷ NYT-Oct 26/50]

⁸ Jonathan Eig, *Birth of the Pill*, pp. 149-50

⁹ [Bulloch/192; Tone/211; Eig/6]