

EUROPE BEFORE THE WAR

IN THE late autumn of 1913 the Sanger family set sail from Boston bound for Glasgow, and then for Paris where I intended to gather practical information on contraception

But how was this trip financed? asks the money minded reader, who wonders how an impecunious artist, his visionary young wife, and three offspring, could thus set out for Europe, taking no thought of the morrow

Such questions always annoy me I cannot remember how trips were financed I don't really know how most of my ventures in this work were ever financed I am of no economical turn of mind I do things first, and somehow or another they get paid for If I had waited to finance my various battles for birth control, I do not suppose they ever would have become realities I suppose here is the real difference between the idealist—or the fanatic, as we are called—and the ordinary normal human being

The history of the accomplishment of the birth control movement has been a series of activities where vision and aim

have preceded any consideration of the financing of its requirements. The important, outstanding events, such as the publication of *The Woman Rebel* my study in England, Holland, France, and Germany, the international conference of 1925, the establishment of clinics, the Zurich conference, and many, many other ventures have been inaugurated and brought to success on the motive of the initial inspiration, without knowing where the financial requirements were to come from.

I don't know today how the recent Zurich conference was financed, really. I never planned to get the money first and then do the work according to the money in hand. I saw the thing to do, and then began to do it, and inevitably, without fail, the money came to pay for it. Printing bills, conferences, salaries for employees, drives, all were the same. When the urge to do an important thing came, I did it regardless of the money on hand or the possibility of getting it. Often when a letter of importance was to be sent broadcast to the friends of the movement I was confronted by a bank account so low that even the rent could not be paid. I always went ahead and inevitably the account doubled.

The trip to Europe, however, seemed so urgent, so necessary, that no matter what future sacrifices had to be made we would make them when we came to them. An inventory of our finances was taken. Our house in the suburbs had been sold. This money, together with the savings from our combined labor of years which was invested for our children's future education, had now to be drawn upon for study and preparation by this, our first and long desired trip abroad.

Our stay in Glasgow, which preceded our visit to Paris, was most illuminating. Here was a city under municipal ownership government which had been so successful for the past twenty five years that it was about to pay off the last debt on its railways. Socialists turned to it as to a victory which they invited all to witness. I went to learn all I could. Perhaps here at last women received consideration. Municipal ownership sounded big and fine in those days. I was certain to find encouraging data here.

I went the rounds of the markets, the schools, the playgrounds, the laundries, bakeries, and at last the houses. The excellent living quarters for the workers were held as an example for the rest of the world. For so many rooms, so much light, so many people to a square foot, no overcrowding allowed. For a one-child family, so many rooms, for a two-child family, so many more, three—and there the story closes.

Well, I asked, what happens when they have five or six children?

Oh, they can't live here, replied the attendant. They must live elsewhere.

But where? said I. Conversation ceased. I was looked upon as a trouble maker and not encouraged to look further. Nevertheless I was out for facts, and I wanted to know what a municipal government did with its families of six, seven and eight children. I soon learned that they were huddled in crowded quarters in various parts of the city or its outskirts, but mainly in the shipyard districts far from the privileges of the municipal bakeries, laundries, markets or tram service. Municipal ownership was successful *only* where the size of the family was considered and limited.

Then I came face to face with the facts, and realized that only a controlled fertility in human beings can maintain any progress. No system of society depending for its continuation on intelligent humans can stand long unless it encourages the control of the birth rate and includes contraceptive knowledge as a right. Without it no system, no matter what its ideals, can withstand the overpowering force of uncontrolled, unrestricted fecundity. I was convinced of this when I left Glasgow.

No sight in this world could be worse than the women of that city walking through the streets at midnight dragging two or three little children beside them calling out: Bread, bread! More untouchables, which even a mighty municipal government ignored. Thousands of them, huddled together in their filth, bodies clothed in rags, drink their only relief—these women, ignored by governments and religions, are the



GRANT AND PEGGY SAYING GOODBYE TO MOTHER



THREE CHILDREN WERE A CURIOSITY IN PARIS
Grant Peggy and Stuart Sanger March 1914

great untouchables of the world reduced to a state of abject servility by the much vaunted glories of motherhood

Glasgow was a distinct disappointment. Municipal ownership could not solve the problems of women and children. Two weeks was enough to prove beyond a doubt that it was a surface cure. It could not probe the depths of the disease.

The only beauty I found in Glasgow was the trip by night through the city on the river Clyde. That was a fairyland of enchantment. The shipbuilding of 1913 was in full swing, and every shipyard was running double shifts to get ready those modern palaces of the seas. This beauty by night was the redeeming feature of my visit there.

Meanwhile, William Sanger was anxious to get settled in a studio in Paris. The architect was hungry for some more creative expression than the building of suburban homes. And I was not sorry to turn my thoughts from the misery of those slum mothers with their shrill crying voices to thoughts of Paris.

One dull rainy day a little later when the cold seemed to penetrate to the very marrow of our bones, the Sangers, five in number, embarked upon a miserable little steamer bound for Antwerp. How seasick we were as the little boat bounced and tossed through the stormy North Sea! The children were thrown out of their beds. Twenty six horses in the hold had to be shot, their legs having been broken in the storm.

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We were glad to land at Antwerp and to speed on our way to Paris. Paris in 1913 was not the Paris of today. The Gare du Nord, where we arrived with our three tired, hungry children, seemed a veritable madhouse. At a near by cafe we ordered milk for the children and were given three foaming glasses of beer!

Paris was at first a distinct disappointment too. My dream of Paris as a place of gaiety and elegance was rudely shattered. Arriving there as we did at the end of a cold dismal October day, it seemed like another Glasgow. Even the children were dressed in drab, gloomy black aprons. The atmos

phere of petty penury, of pinched poverty, destroyed my illusions and made us homesick at once

We went straight to an hotel. Within a day or two we found a quaint apartment on the Left Bank, on the Boulevard St Michel near the Val de Grace. William Sanger found a studio in the Impasse du Maine, in back of the Gare Montparnasse. The children attended school, and I began to delve into the population question.

We were well armed with letters of introduction to artists, writers, editors, leaders of the liberal and radical movement. Many of them were obscure in those days, but today they are the leaders of French thought and politics.

There was a feeling of unrest in the air. Many anti-German war plays were being produced in the Paris theatres, most of them based upon the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and the problem of Alsace Lorraine. *Revanche!* was the echo in the very air—*Revenge!* Placards bearing that catchword were placed in the tomb of Napoleon.

One of the most interesting and the most friendly of the French liberals we came to know was the patriarchal Victor Dave, undaunted veteran of many a battle for social justice, and then the only survivor of the French Commune.

We celebrated Thanksgiving Day in our own apartment. We had invited a few American friends to come to meet Victor Dave. Thanksgiving Day loses its significance in Europe, but it was an occasion nevertheless for bringing together French and American men and women having the same interests and ideals.

Victor Dave was then past eighty. He was mentally keen and active, speaking the English language far better than any of us spoke French. He was called on to speak during the evening, and arose to predict a world calamity of an impending war which was greeted with frank amusement by us all. He said he had that past week been at work translating for the French government several treaties of forty years' standing which had just expired. These treaties were concerned with the Balkan States. He was one of the few Frenchmen who

could translate the languages of the Balkan States, as well as the several dialects. For this rare accomplishment he received in payment from the French government a sum which at that time was equivalent to three dollars a week. He lived on this salary, and laughed at life's absurdities. When he spoke to us that night he was serious and sad. He said what he had to tell us was to be considered confidential. He then went on to say that within five years Europe would be plunged into the greatest war of history. He had read the treaties, they had outrun their time, they would not be renewed. From the new agreements then being written he could see the writing on the wall. War! All of Europe was to be plunged into war!

This news was taken with shrugged shoulders by those present. Getting old, was the verdict. He's getting old and can't see that the world is beyond wars, agreed the sophisticated. We all believed that the intelligence of the age would never tolerate another war. However, before a year had elapsed Europe was plunged into the World War which had its beginnings in the Balkan States, as Dave had predicted.

The following week I was invited to dine at the home of the editor of *Humanite* the great daily newspaper of the CGT. There I met the wives of several men prominent in political affairs. The greatest difficulty was my own poor French, for few Frenchwomen knew English at all before 1914. Good fortune, however, brought me in touch with an Englishwoman, the wife of a prominent French editor, and to her I clung and talked during my entire visit.

At the editor's home I met that great orator of the radical labor movement, Jean Jaures, who was destined to be the victim of a cowardly assassin's bullet. He was shot in the back on the very eve of the great European war which he had done his utmost to prevent,—shot and instantly killed on the night of July 31, 1914, while dining with friends in a little restaurant near the Bourse. His assassin, Raoul Villain, was held in prison until March, 1919, when he was acquitted, apparently on the ground that he had acted merely from mis

guided patriotism. He stated on his arrest that his act was due to the opposition of Jaures to the three year military training law. A man of tremendous vitality and vivacity, his eyes aflame with the hope of a new social order, Jean Jaures privately agreed with me that the working man must limit the size of his family to conform with his earning capacity. Those discussions were serious, earnest, constructive.

It was comforting and encouraging to find so much understanding among the French leaders of thought whom I met. At once they agreed that family limitation was an essential part of labor's freedom. The Syndicalists especially had advocated the practice for many years. That organization had issued leaflets, pamphlets, and books not only on the theory but on the practice and methods of contraception.

The wives of these Frenchmen all took part in these discussions, openly and fearlessly. These women were already liberated from conventional ideas. They left the economics to the men folk, but on questions concerning sex, love, marriage and the fundamental freedom of woman they were fearless and well informed.

The Neo-Malthusian movement, which had been inaugurated by the Drysdales in England, was strongly rooted in French thought. A paper called *Génération Consciente* was published by the French Neo-Malthusians, and a number of well written handbooks on the intimate problems of love and marriage were widely circulated. The French predilection for quality rather than quantity was evidenced in the falling birth rate, though militarists and imperialists were bitter in their denunciations of the movement. The World War and the eventual triumph of militarism were finally to effect a *volte face* and the nation which had perhaps done more than any other to teach conscious procreation was by the irony of circumstance to give prizes to the parents of large families and later on to enact new and drastic laws against the practice of contraception.

Such was to be the official attitude. But go into the little theatres, the music halls, read the daily press, and you will

discover that despite these laws the French will never give up their right to decide for themselves in the matter of prudential parenthood

The cause for alarm in the slowly increasing population of France was not shared by the French people in 1913. This attitude has changed only among the militarists and religious cults so prevalent in France since the World War. As a matter of fact, France has a higher birth rate today (1931) than England, but her death rate, especially her infant mortality, is higher, and consequently her survivals are less. France has stood at the top of the world as a low birth rate country. With that goes culture, art, industry, employment, and a finer independence and development on the part of the working classes.

I remember going to a great labor meeting at the hall of the *Confederation Générale du Travail*. The vast hall was filled with some three thousand French workmen, all standing, all wearing caps and loose corduroys, which were the badge of the proletariat. As we were going to that meeting we crossed the bridge to get to the hall. The police were stopping all who crossed the bridge, demanding an account of where they were going. They feared a riot. We went with Victor Dave. His picturesque white hair was surmounted by a silk hat. This badge of respectability was the passport which got us over the bridge.

The meeting was revolutionary in spirit. Social unrest was in the air. All the speakers urged the importance of the international brotherhood and solidarity of the working classes. All were opposed to war. They urged their fellow workers not to take up arms against the workers of other nations. They opposed vigorously the efforts of the French government to arouse national hatreds through patriotic sentiments.

It seemed to me as if war was an impossibility. Yet, when we made our way out of the crowded, smoky hall into the narrow, alley like street into the Paris night, we found every exit into the boulevards guarded by hundreds of gendarmes, both mounted and afoot. It was bewildering to me. It was

a foreboding of the catastrophic fears I found myself puzzling over the problems of European politics and wondering what the future was to bring forth

This was my first experience in feeling that foreigners in Paris were being watched by the police, that our every movement was under surveillance. The unease that this feeling produced was more than sharpened a few days later. The incident is worth recounting.

Among the letters of introduction was one given to me by Edward Mylius, who had been arrested in London for criminal libel, the complainant being none other than George V, King of England. Mylius, a young social rebel, had circulated a pamphlet written by Edward Holton James, nephew of William and Henry James, now an adherent of Gandhi, declaring that the King of England had once contracted amorganatic marriage. The case had attracted international comment. After his conviction and jail sentence Mylius had come to New York, where I had met him.

He gave me a letter of introduction to the Hindu nationalist, Shyamaji Krishnavarma, then living in Paris. This Indian patriot and scholar was the leader of his countrymen who were conducting an underground battle for the independence of India. His movements were carefully noted from the Prefecture of Police, evidently working in cooperation with the British Secret Service.

I found out to my amazement that the concierges in every house in Paris were *ex officio* agents of the Prefecture of Police and were compelled to make regular reports on the activity, no matter how petty, of the tenants of the houses they cared for. These reports were incorporated, so we were told into the *dossier* or notebook, kept by the police.

I sent the letter to Krishnavarma. The next day the distinguished Hindu came to call on me. He asked if he could give a reception in my honor the following week. I was more than flattered by this compliment. I assented readily. An afternoon was set for the following week. At the appointed

hour, with my friend Jessie Ashley, I was ushered into the spacious, luxurious salon of Krishnavarma

He was a man in his late forties—a scholar, a philosopher who derived his social and political ideas from the Spencerian doctrines which most of us considered quite old foggy and outworn. He was the editor of an organ called the *Indian Sociologist* printed in the English language by French printers and surreptitiously carried across the Channel and circulated in Great Britain among the Indian Home Rulers

Nearly twenty five men were present, Indians all, and but one woman besides ourselves—the wife of our host. She sat abjectly silent throughout the whole discussion of social and economic problems. The colloquy was exciting. In the course of our discussion Mr Krishnavarma gave his wife a curt command. She arose swiftly, went into the library, and returned with a well thumbed and pencil marked copy of his pet philosopher, Herbert Spencer

I was shocked by the slave like attitude of the wife. It came to me in a flash that here was a man's salon in the heart of Paris. Though he was battling for the independence of India, Krishnavarma, it was evident, had no toleration for the independence of women. He seemed to consider his wife as neither an independent being nor an equal but fundamentally as a slave to his wishes. After we left, Jessie Ashley and I, both avowed Feminists, commented on the wife's subservience and the fact that no other women were present

I had not been in the apartment in the Boulevard St Michel for half an hour when my daughter Peggy, aged three, ran excitedly into the bedroom where I was dressing, crying

'There are three gendarmes at the door!' The children loved the word gendarmes, and talked about them often. I went out to meet them. They demanded to know who lived in the apartment, where we had come from, the object of our visit to France, how long we intended to stay in Paris, how we had found the apartment, from whom we had rented it, and where I had been that afternoon. The questions came faster

and faster How long had I known Krishnavarma? What were we doing at his home?

Our landlady, I learned later, had failed to send our names to the prefecture This was the apparent reason for the official call, but in reality it was a check up on every one who visited the house of the Indian conspirator

For the rest of our sojourn in Paris our actions were known to the police

I was struck with the motherly attention our *femme de chambre* gave her one and only child She came regularly to work at the apartment, but no words could persuade her to come before Jean had been taken to his school, and nothing could prevent her leaving her work promptly at noon to go to fetch him from school for his luncheon Such considerate care was respected by us all I compared this attitude of the French mother of one child who, though compelled to work, gave the child her attention and care, with those drunken, slovenly mothers of ten children in Glasgow who dragged their young children through the streets at midnight begging for bread I began to see the small family as a part of social evolution

Bill Haywood was then in Paris Together we visited the working-class districts and several homes where conditions were so favorable we could only credit them to the system of small families which was so prevalent all over France I went into shops and book stalls and purchased all the devices on contraception obtainable I talked to doctors and midwives and druggists, to working men and women, to rich and poor I gathered together all available information and began to weed out the useless and to select the most suitable methods for home consumption

In France the word proletariat was interpreted as meaning producers of children The right to knowledge of contraceptive technique was almost a national right Even the Catholic Church could not deter its practice The individuality of the Frenchman and his ideas of individual rights made it hard for him to understand *why* or *how* any American could

stand for laws interfering with the practice of contraception, which is so strictly the affair of the individual. Alas that the same legal restrictions apply in France today! In France information had been generally disseminated from mother to daughter for generations, since the Code Napoleon. The peasant mothers prided themselves on their special recipe for suppositories. Soap douches were popular aids to hygiene, and every married woman knew all there was to know about contraception as well as the art of love.

The weakness of the movement there was that it had no direction. It was entirely an individual affair. Methods learned from any sources were practiced. Doctors did not teach contraception, but they attended to the failures. Drug gists advised as to the best methods, consequently there were too many failures, and abortions resulted.

I was not pleased with the findings of my studies in Paris. I wanted something more definite. I longed to see so powerful a force properly directed and controlled. But the Frenchman shrugged his shoulders and laughed, doubtless glad he was in France and not in America.

My stay in France was brief. After I had obtained the facts I had come for I was restless and unhappy and wanted to be off. The brooding spirit was upon me and would not give me peace.

At this time the women of England were fighting valiantly for their political freedom, and telegrams and letters came beseeching me to go over to London to enter the fight with Mrs Pankhurst. I had long been an ardent admirer of her courage and generalship. To enter the battle of Votes for Women at times seemed a stern duty, now that I was so near the battle front the duty became almost an obligation.

Another temptation came from Freiburg, Germany, where two American women had gone to look into the new miracle of Twilight Sleep. I was urged to come over to study the method and to help them spread this great truth into the highways and byways of America.

Anything which would relieve women of the pangs of

childbirth was indeed a godsend, and offered a great mission. But it was not enough. To secure for women the right to vote and to be acknowledged as equals in a civilized community was truly a great and noble task, but it was not enough. Both of these causes were necessary to our civilization and needed champions to espouse them, but to me neither of them went as deep in social evolution nor were so necessary to woman's progress as the right to control her own generative functions and the right to obtain knowledge for this purpose. Neither of the tempting missions went deep enough to satisfy my prevailing desire to eradicate from the social system the negative attitude toward women and the exclusion of her fundamental right.

Thus I turned away from the two most tempting and interesting activities of that year and continued the brooding, mulling, brooding attitude in my endeavor to solve the complex problems of woman's freedom. The whole of life was like a picture puzzle, and think as I would I could not put it together.

A whole year had been given over to this inactive, incoherent, inarticulate brooding. Family and friends were generous in gentleness and patience. My mind was as though focused on a distant dream, and consecration, concentration, visualization finally brought it into form. The plan of action began to take shape, light began to come through. The artist husband was to be ensconced in his studio to continue his work in Paris, while I was to return home to America with the children and stir up a national campaign.

While I had been engrossed with the problems of family limitation, my artist husband was revelling in the pleasure of meeting the men he considered the great artists of the period. He came home aglow with the news of meeting Henri Matisse, in those days not yet emerged from obscurity. We had met the great Monet, and other impressionists of the period.

My burning desire was not satisfied with listening to these dreams of beauty, of structure, of form. I knew that women

were dying, suffering, in agony, in my own country I felt that I had the knowledge that they needed I wanted to get back and shout it out to them from the housetops

The three children and I left Paris on the thirty first of December, embarking at Cherbourg on the S S *New York* William Sanger remained in Paris to continue his absorbed study of art Little did any of us realize as we parted at the Gare Saint Lazare that chilly winter day that our little family was never to be reunited We never dreamed that circumstances over which we had no control were to widen the paths between William Sanger and myself Yet sometimes in life the ideals which take possession of the mind become more imperious, more predominant than personal feelings Such was the case in the relationship between William Sanger and myself

Three children in Europe is a curiosity, but on board a steamer their seasick ailments arouse a certain sympathy from all passengers and stewards alike When one of the deck stewards asked if I had a nurse or maid to help me attend them I said No, that it was no trouble

He replied with grave concern Well, Madam, it s the likes of you that has in em the makings of a real ero