

A PUBLIC NUISANCE

THE selection of a place for the first birth control clinic was of the greatest importance. No one could actually tell how it would be received in any neighborhood. I thought of all the possible difficulties. The indifference of women's organizations, the ignorance of the workers themselves, the resentment of social agencies, the opposition of the medical profession. Then there was the law—the law of New York State.

Section 1142 was definite. It stated that *no one* could give information to prevent conception to *anyone* for any reason. There was, however, Section 1145, which distinctly stated that physicians (*only*) could give advice to prevent conception for the cure or prevention of disease. I inquired about the section, and was told by two attorneys and several physicians that this clause was an exception to 1142 referring only to venereal disease. But anyway, as I was not a physician, it could not protect me. Dared I risk it?

I began to think of the doctors I knew. Several who had

previously promised now refused I wrote, telephoned, asked friends to ask other friends to help me find a woman doctor to help me demonstrate the need of a birth control clinic in New York None could be found No one wanted to go to jail No one cared to test out the law Perhaps it would have to be done without a doctor But it had to be done, that I knew

Fania Mindell, an enthusiastic young worker in the cause, had come on from Chicago to help me Together we tramped the streets on that dreary day in early October, through a driving rainstorm, to find the best location at the cheapest terms possible We stopped to inquire about vacant stores of the officials in one of the milk stations Don't come over here

Keep out of this section We don't want any trouble over here These and other pleasantries were hurled at us as we darted in and out of the various places asking for advice, hoping for a welcome

Finally at 46 Amboy Street, in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, we found a friendly landlord with a good place vacant at fifty dollars a month rental, and Brownsville was settled on It was one of the most thickly populated sections It had a large population of working class Jews, always interested in health measures always tolerant of new ideas, willing to listen and to accept advice whenever the health of mother or children was involved I knew that here there would at least be no breaking of windows, no hurling of insults into our teeth, but I was scarcely prepared for the popular support, the sympathy and friendly help given us in that neighborhood from that day to this

The Brownsville section of Brooklyn in 1916 was a hive of futile industry—dingy, squalid, peopled with hard working men and women, the home of poverty which was steadily growing worse in the tide of increasing responsibilities Early every morning, weary eyed men poured from the low tenement houses that crouched together as if for warmth, bound for ten or twelve hours of work At the same time, or earlier, their women rose to set in motion that ceaseless round of cooking,

cleaning, and sewing that barely kept the young generation alive. A fatalistic, stolid, and tragic army of New Yorkers dwelt here, most of them devout Jews or Italians, all of them energetic and ambitious,—but trapped by nature's despotism.

It was not a section unique in New York City. Manhattan Island was and still is dotted with such dismal villages. Even Queens, with its pretensions to a higher standard, has its share. But here there seemed to be an opportunity to bring help to as many women who were desperately in need of it as in any other one locality of the metropolis,—a message which could cut down the difficulties of the future.

We determined to open a birth control clinic at 46 Amboy Street to disseminate information where it was poignantly required by human beings. Our inspiration was the mothers of the poor, our object, to help them.

With a small bundle of handbills and a large amount of zeal, we fared forth each morning in a house to house canvass of the district in which the clinic was located. Every family in that great district received a dodger printed in English, Yiddish and Italian. (A facsimile appears on opposite page.)

Would the people come? Did they come? Nothing, not even the ghost of Anthony Comstock, could have stopped them from coming! All day long and far into the evening, in ever increasing numbers, they came. A hundred women and a score of men sought our help on the opening day.

Women of every race and creed flocked to the clinic with the determination not to have any more children than their health could stand or their husbands could support. Jews and Christians, Protestants and Roman Catholics alike made their confessions to us, whatever they may have professed at home or in church. Some did not dare talk this over with their husbands and some came urged on by their husbands. Men themselves came after work, and some brought timid, embarrassed wives, apologetically dragging a string of little children.

Every day the little outer waiting room was crowded. The women came in pairs, with their neighbors, with their married daughters, or even their husbands. Some came in groups,

MOTHERS!

Can you afford to have a large family?

Do you want any more children?

If not, why do you have them?

DO NOT KILL, DO NOT TAKE LIFE BUT PREVENT
 Safe, Harmless Information can be obtained of trained
 Nurses at

46 AMBOY STREET

NEAR PITKIN AVE — BROOKLYN

Tell Your Friends and Neighbors All Mothers Welcome

A registration fee of 10 cents entitles any mother to this information

מוטערס!

זייט איהר פערמעגליך צו האבען א גרויסע פאמיליע?

וויילט איהר האבען נאך קינדער?

איב ניס ווארום האט איהר זיי?

פערדערט נים געהומט נישט אן לעבען גור פערדיט זיך

זכערע אויגעלייכע אויסקנפפע קענט איר בעקומען פון ערפארענע נירסעס אין

46 אמבוי סטריט ניער פיטקין עווענו ברוקלין

מאכט דאס בעקאנט צו א ערע גר אין שכנות יעדער מוטער איז ווילקאמען

פאר 10 סענטס א נשר ב געלד זינט אירר בערעכט נישט צו דען אינפארם שאן

MADRI!

Potete permettervi il lusso d'aver altri bambini?

Ne volete ancora?

Se non ne volete piu perche continuate a metterli
 al mondo?

NON UCCIDETE MA PREVENITE!

Informazioni sicure ed innocue saranno fornite da infermiere autorizzate a

46 AMBOY STREET Near Pitkin Ave Brooklyn

a cominciare dal 12 Ottobre Avvertite le vostre amiche e vicine

Tutte le madri sono ben accette La tassa d'iscrizione di 10 cents da diritto

☛ a qualunque madre di ricevere consigli ed informazioni gratis

with nursing babies clasped in their arms. Some came from the far end of Long Island, from Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New Jersey. They came from near and far to learn the secret which they said was possessed by the rich and denied to the poor.

To Fania Mindell, Ethel Byrne—the nurse, and myself these women told the constantly reiterated but ever varying story of low wages and high rent, or irregular employment and steadily rising prices. They told us of a so-called home having only two rooms and one window, with two beds for a family of seven, of another in which three cots and a soap box had to suffice for eight children. Fine, hopeful men came to us with stories of wives broken in health and husbands broken in spirit, of sons sent to prison and daughters to prostitution. And always there were the helpless tales of children that were not wanted but came in never-ending numbers.

Newly married couples, with little but faith, hope and love to live on, told of the tiny flat that they had chosen, of the husband's low wages, and of their determination to work it out together if only the children would not come too soon.

Wrecks of women who were themselves already beyond relief came just to tell us of the tragedies and to urge us to save other women from the sorrows of ruined health, overworked husbands, and broods of sickly, defective, and wayward children growing up on the streets, filling dispensaries and hospitals, filing through the juvenile courts.

A gaunt skeleton of a woman suddenly stood up one day and made an impassioned speech to the women who were present. They come with their charity when we have more children than we can feed, and when we get sick with more children for trying not to have them they just give us more charity talk! I tell you that some day they will erect a monument to Margaret Sanger on the spot where she came to help women like us! She had been married fifteen years, was the mother of seven living children and four dead ones, and had undergone twenty eight self induced abortions.

When I asked a bright little Roman Catholic woman what

she would say to the priest when he learned that she had been to the Clinic, she answered indignantly It's none of his business My husband has a weak heart and works only four days a week He gets twelve dollars, and we can barely live on it now We have enough children

Her friend, sitting by, nodded a vigorous approval When I was married, she broke in, the priest told us to have lots of children, and we listened to him I had fifteen Six are living Nine baby funerals in our house I am thirty six years old now Look at me! I look sixty

As I walked home that night, I made a mental calculation of fifteen baptismal fees, nine funeral expenses, masses and candles for the repose of nine little souls, the physical suffering of the mother, and the emotional suffering of both parents, and I asked myself, Was it fair? Is this the price of Christianity?

A socially significant group were these puzzled, groping women, misled and bewildered in a tangled jungle of popular superstitions, old wives remedies and back fence advice—all the ignorant sex teaching of the poor, an unguided fumbling after truth Unconsciously, they dramatized the terrible need of intelligent and scientific instruction in these matters of life—and death

The most pitiful of all were the reluctantly expectant mothers, who had hoped to find a way out of their dilemma It was heart breaking to have to send them away, but there was nothing else to do Their desperate determination to risk all, their threat of suicide haunted one at night For them, birth control came too late

It was on October 16, 1916, that the three of us—Fania Mindell, Ethel Byrne and myself—opened the doors of the first birth control clinic in America I believed then and do today, that the opening of those doors to the mothers of Brownsville was an event of social significance in the lives of American womanhood

News of our work spread like wildfire Within a few days there was not a darkened tenement, hovel or flat but was

brightened by the knowledge that motherhood could be voluntary, that children need not be born into the world unless they are wanted and have a place provided for them. For the first time, women talked openly of this terror of unwanted pregnancy which had haunted their lives since time immemorial. The newspapers, in glaring headlines, used the words birth control, and carried the message that somewhere in Brooklyn there was a place where contraceptive information could be obtained by all overburdened mothers who wanted it.

Ethel Byrne, who is my sister and a trained nurse, assisted me in advising, explaining, and demonstrating to the women how to prevent conception. As all of our 488 records were confiscated by the detectives who later arrested us for violation of the New York State law, it is difficult to tell exactly how many more women came in those few days to seek advice, but we estimate that it was far more than five hundred. As in any new enterprise, false reports were maliciously spread about the clinic, weird stories without the slightest foundation of truth. We talked plain talk and gave plain facts to the women who came there. We kept a record of every applicant. All were mothers, most of them had large families.

It was whispered about that the police were to raid the place for abortions. We had no fear of that accusation. We were trying to spare mothers the necessity of that ordeal by giving them proper contraceptive information. It was well that so many of the women in the neighborhood knew the truth of our doings. Hundreds of them who had witnessed the facts came to the courtroom afterward, eager to testify in our behalf.

One day a woman by the name of Margaret Whitehurst came to us. She said that she was the mother of two children and that she had not money to support more. Her story was a pitiful one—all lies, of course, but the government acts that way. She asked for our literature and preventives, and received both. Then she triumphantly went to the District Attorney's office and secured a warrant for the arrest of my sister, Mrs. Ethel Byrne, our interpreter, Miss Fania Mindell, and myself.

The crusade was actually under way! It is no exaggeration



GRANT AND STUART 1916



Pl t by U d r w d & U d r w d

WHERE THE CAUSE WAS BORN

to call this period in the birth control movement the most stirring period up to that time, perhaps the most stirring of all times, for it was the only period during which we had experienced jail terms, hunger strikes, and intervention by the Chief Executive of the state. It was the first time that there was any number of widespread, popular demonstrations in our behalf.

Nevertheless, it was a period fraught with emotional distress for us all. In it was involved the welfare of my sister, and at one time her very life. My eyes were open to the evils of prison life, and we experienced no small physical discomfort for the sake of emphasizing the importance of the birth control movement. Looking back I have no regrets. But, looking ahead, I am grateful that there looms no immediate necessity of repeating those passionate, dangerous, and menacing days.

The arrest and raid on the Brooklyn clinic was spectacular. There was no need of a large force of plain clothes men to drag off a trio of decent, serious women who were testing out a law on a fundamental principle. My federal arrest, on the contrary, had been assigned to intelligent men. One had to respect the dignity of their mission, but the New York city officials seem to use tactics suitable only for crooks, bandits and burglars. We were not surprised at being arrested, but the shock and horror of it was that a *woman* with a squad of five plain clothes men, conducted the raid and made the arrest. A woman—the irony of it!

I refused to close down the clinic, hoping that a court decision would allow us to continue such necessary work. I was to be disappointed. Pressure was brought upon the landlord, and we were dispossessed by the law as a public nuisance. In Holland the clinics were called public utilities.

When the policewoman entered the clinic with her squad of plain clothes men and announced the arrest of Miss Mundell and myself (Mrs. Byrne was not present at the time and her arrest followed later), the room was crowded to suffocation with women waiting in the outer room. The police began bullying these mothers, asking them questions, writing down their names in order to subpoena them to testify against us.

at the trial. These women, always afraid of trouble which the very presence of a policeman signifies, screamed and cried aloud. The children on their laps screamed, too. It was like a panic for a few minutes until I walked into the room where they were stampeding and begged them to be quiet and not to get excited. I assured them that nothing could happen to them, that I was under arrest but they would be allowed to return home in a few minutes. That quieted them. The men were blocking the door to prevent anyone from leaving, but I finally persuaded them to allow these women to return to their homes, unmolested though terribly frightened by it all.

Crowds began to gather outside. A long line of women with baby carriages and children had been waiting to get into the clinic. Now the streets were filled, and police had to see that traffic was not blocked. The patrol wagon came rattling through the streets to our door, and at length Miss Mindell and I took our seats within and were taken to the police station.

As I sat in the rear of the car and looked out on that seething mob of humans, I wondered, and asked myself *what* had gone out of the race. Something had gone from them which silenced them, made them impotent to defend their rights. I thought of the suffragists in England, and pictured the results of a similar arrest there. But as I sat in this mood, the car started to go. I looked out at the mass and heard a scream. It came from a woman wheeling a baby carriage, who had just come around the corner preparing to visit the clinic. She saw the patrol wagon, realized what had happened, left the baby carriage on the walk, rushed through the crowd to the wagon and cried to me. Come back! Come back and save me! The woman looked wild. She ran after the car for a dozen yards or so, when some friends caught her weeping form in their arms and led her back to the sidewalk. That was the last thing I saw as the Black Maria dashed off to the station.