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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Margaret Sanger's Obscenity

By GLORIA FELDT

WHEN you tour the Lower East Side Tenement Museum's restoration at 97 Orchard Street, you walk through the experience of the immigrants who arrived in waves at the turn of the 20th century, often to live five or six to a tiny room. According to the 1900 census, the 18 wives in the Orchard Street building had given birth to 111 children altogether, of whom 67 were then alive.

A 40 percent infant and child mortality rate sounds shocking now. Back then it was the norm. Maternal mortality was 99 percent higher than it is today; 40 percent of those deaths were caused by infection, of which half resulted from illegal or self-induced abortion. Birth control was to revolutionize women's health. But it would take a social revolution to get there.

In 1912, Margaret Sanger was a nurse serving poor Lower East Side women like Sadie Sachs, a mother of three who had been warned that another pregnancy would kill her. When Sadie asked her doctor how to prevent pregnancy, he told her to tell her husband to sleep on the roof. Pregnant again, Sadie self-induced an abortion, contracted an infection and died.

Sanger began to address women's lack of information about birth control by writing a sex education column called "What Every Girl Should Know" for *The Call*, a socialist newspaper. But in 1914, a warrant was issued for Sanger's arrest. She stood accused of violating the Comstock law, which made it a crime to circulate "obscurity" through the mail.

Passed in 1873 in response to pressure from a crusader named Anthony Comstock, the law defined information about contraception or abortion as obscenity. Comstock boasted that he destroyed hundreds of tons of "lewd and lascivious material," including 60,000 "obscene rubber articles," otherwise known as condoms.

In place of Sanger's column, *The Call* ran an empty box that read: "What Every Girl Should Know — nothing, by order of the United States Post Office!" Never intimidated, Sanger published "The Woman Rebel," a periodical intended to challenge Comstock laws directly. She then fled to Europe, where she visited a birth control clinic in the Netherlands and began to envision setting up a network of clinics throughout the United States.

By the time she returned to America, public opinion was swinging her way, and she sensed the time was right for action. On Oct. 16, 1916, Sanger opened America's first birth control clinic in the Brownsville district of Brooklyn. Her sister, Ethel Byrne, was the nurse; it would be some time before they could get a doctor to join the effort. Handbills in English, Yiddish and Italian advertised the clinic throughout the neighborhood.

The police closed that clinic 10 days and 464 patients later. But Sanger, who would go on to establish the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, had founded something much larger than a clinic: she ignited a movement for women's reproductive freedom.

During the 20th century, this movement won such decisive victories that today many people cannot believe they could ever be reversed: birth control and then abortion were made legal; better contraceptive methods, like the pill, were developed; and the government started financing family planning for low-income women. Today, more than 90 percent of Americans have used birth control.

When Sanger opened her clinic, women wouldn't get the vote for four more years. And yet the debates of her day over suffrage and contraception sound strikingly familiar to modern ears. Would such policies promote women's equality or destroy the family? Would they advance justice or spread promiscuity? Where was the line between medical care and pornography? The answers, then as now, depend on your views about women, sex and power.

The current struggle over birth control, abortion and sex education make clear that courageous actions like Sanger's are as necessary now as they were 90 years ago. For if anyone doubts that women's reproductive freedom has been crucial to American progress, I recommend a short walk through the lives of the women of 97 Orchard Street.

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