Birth Control Crusader

Daring Margaret Sanger Earned Place in History

By MARGO HARAKAS
Post Staff Writer

A colleague called her "a little bunch of hellfire" that she was. She was a rebel, a drier, a compassionate soul who believed not in God or masters, but in the inherent right of women to choose their pregnancies.

She went to jail several times for daring to discuss contraception with women. She was Margaret Sanger, who abandoned her family for "the greater cause" and later, much later, worried about the price they all had paid.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of her birth. Mrs. Sanger died in 1966 in a Tucson, Ariz., nursing home. She had been placed there by her older son who later found her surrounded by syphilitic and gignes and gagging out to grab the last of her money.

"She paid for their flattery," said her grandson, Alexander Sanger, 31, a Palm Beach attorney.

Alexander recalls the happier days, when she would come to visit at his family's home in New York. "She was marvellous with young children," he said.

"Hum it in there, Domini," they'd tell her as she pitched a ball across home plate. Domini is short for Domah, a Japanese word, as Alexander recalls, meaning second mother.

At the time of her death, Margaret Sanger was nearly 88. But none of the obit writers got it right. The reason was simple. Margaret Sanger preferred to minimize such things. It was Alexander who pinpointed the exact date his grandmother came squawking into this world.

In the Higgins family Bible at Smith College, he saw where Margaret had changed her entry from 1879 to 1884. (She also frequently quoted the year 1883.) Unfortunately, the ink she used was inferior to that used by her father years before. Her attempt to deceive showed boldly through.

Margaret Sanger was in all things uncommon — in looks, in attitude, in resolution. "She'd stand up to anybody," said her admiring grandson. "It was the Irish in her."

Her militancy got its first public airing with the labor movement. Among the banners she hoisted was that for the Lawrence Textile Strike of 1912. Ever an appreciator of the fine nuances of publicity (good and bad), she gathered up the kids of the strikers and carted them off to New York City. She arranged for the kids to be cared for by strike sympathizers in New York. She made the most of it, parading them through the streets. It was a PR gimmick, but it was marvelous.

Mrs. Sanger received some political awakening from her first husband, William Sanger, architect and artist. He introduced her to Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman and other anarchists of the day.
Margaret Sanger

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Despite her toughness and unrelenting passion, Margaret Sanger was a quiet woman. petite, blue-eyed, red-haired, soft-spoken, she exuded a gentle, almost maternal air, even after many years of controversy.

"She was a woman with a cause," Alexander said. "And the cause, birth control, a term she originated, was all important to her."

"She made a decision early on whether she was going to stay with her husband and children or take on the cause," Alexander said. "Once she decided, she attacked with singleness of purpose."

The turning point came in 1912. Mrs. Sanger told the story often about the tenement window and mother of three on the lower East Side of New York. She had been the mother of three and had been threatened with a forced abortion.

"Then she told the story of the series of events that led to the establishment of the American Birth Control League," Alexander said. "She had been threatened with a forced abortion."

"The next step was to organize the American Birth Control League," Alexander said. "And I was there."

Three months later, another home, the woman was dead.

"She was galvanized to action," Alexander said. "She knew her job and her job was to go to Paris. According to Alexander," she went with her husband, William Sanger, to study art. She went to discover birth control techniques being used in Europe. "The French and Dutch were far ahead of us at that time," Alexander said. "They had established birth control clinics."

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