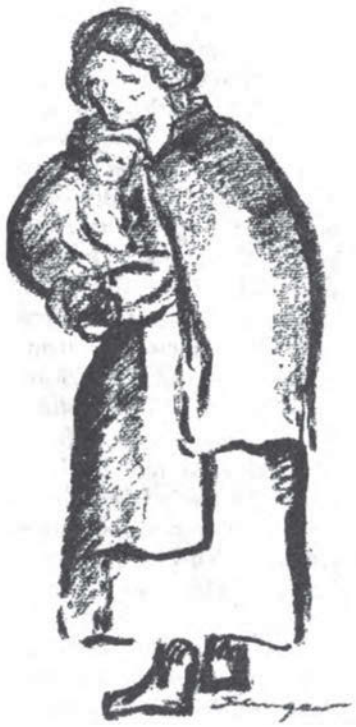
THE BROWNSVILLE BIRTH CONTROL CLINIC

Elizabeth Stuyvesant

With Illustrations by William Sanger

Perhaps we were conscious, intellectually, that we were launching the most important sociological experiment since the establishment of babies' dispensaries, when we opened the doors that crisp morning of October 16th to the forty-five mothers who had waited patiently for the coming of Margaret Sanger. As propagandists, too, in the first dramatic thrill of that bold step, we may have felt that we were doing something sure to arouse the attention of the American people and furnish a constructive answer to the question of "birth control." But as four very human women, at the entrance of those forty-five earnest mothers, the big, absorbing thing for us was their impelling human appeal.



For weeks we had watched the plans for the clinic take shape, Mrs. Sanger having come home from her study of the birth control clinics in Holland determined to demonstrate to America the social value of this way of getting clean, reliable instruction to those who need it most.

Her sister, Mrs. Ethel Byrne, also a trained nurse, had declared her readiness to share in the work and in the legal responsibility.

Miss Fania Mindell, interpreter in three languages and one of the leaders in Chicago's earliest interest in birth control, had waited eagerly for this opportunity to prove her faith in the idea, as well as her attachment to Mrs. Sanger, although knowing as well as the others what would be the legal consequences of her act.

As for me, it was hard to imagine any illegality in doing for Margaret Sanger's clinic what I had for several years done for the Associated Charities of a large city and for a chain of five day nurseries where the children of the poor were cared for while their mothers worked. It had even seemed a natural and straightforward thing to accompany Margaret Sanger while she purchased the necessary equipment for the clinic, the desks, chairs, scrubbing brushes and soap, in addition to a set of the articles necessary to demonstrate to these mothers, most of them foreign-born and all unused to medical terms, just what they should ask for at the drugstore.

The week preceding our "formal opening" at 46 Amboy St., Brownsville, Brooklyn, was spent visiting the homes in that neighborhood to spread the news. This was the only form of announcement possible, as we did not wish the police or King Comstock II to block the experiment before it had had a fair chance. The newspapers, which had announced this newest move in the fight for birth control, were eager to discover and publish the address of the clinic, but in this case we could not use that ally, so valuable in the agitation phase of any reform; we had to carry the message ourselves to the women of Brownsville.

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 where the clinic was located. Every family in that great section received a "dodger" printed in English, Yiddish and Italian:

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.

Margaret Sanger.

Brownsville is the most thickly populated section of Brooklyn. Here the working people live. Here are the dwelling-places of the very poor, a whole city of Jewish and Italian inhabitants housed in the most assiduously investigated and frequently condemned type of tenement. Block after block, street after street, as far as one can see in every direction, there is an endless stretch of dreary walls bursting

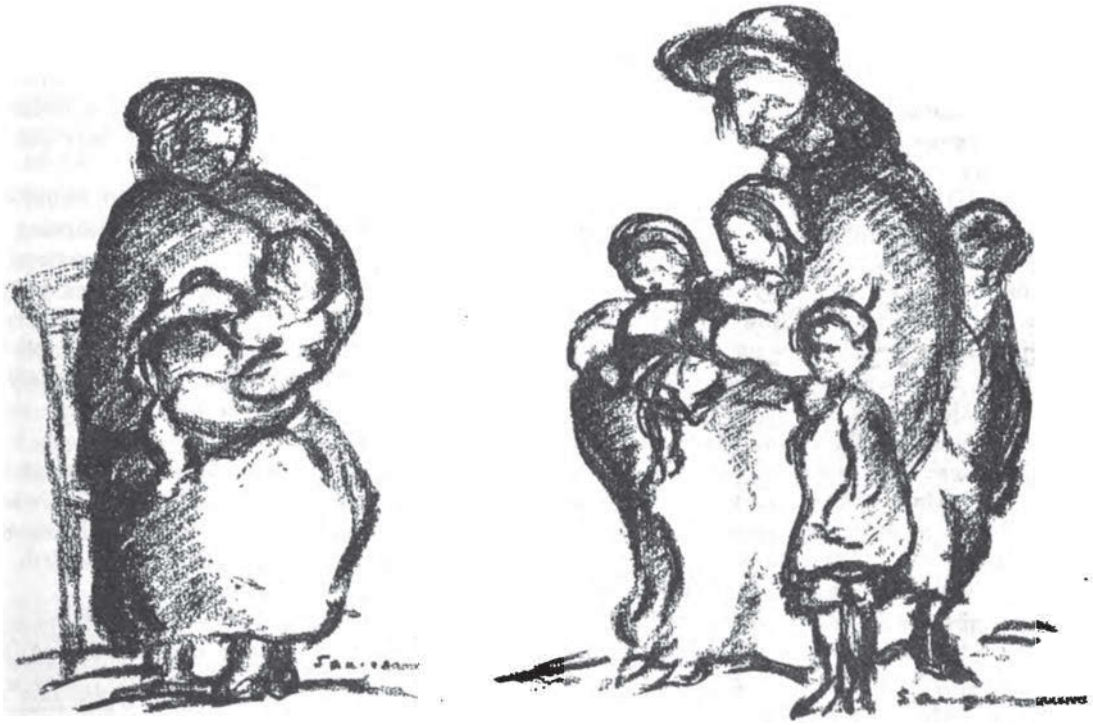
with their excess of wretched humanity. Unkempt children swarm the alley ways and fire escapes and you seldom see a woman without her inevitable baby.

Not one of the women in that section but must have heard Margaret Sanger's clarion call: "Do not take life but PREVENT." Everywhere we were received in the friendliest spirit and with surprised expressions of gratefulness and joy. Not once were we rebuffed or our motives misunderstood. Women—and men—themselves took up the work of spreading the news throughout Brownsville, but the authorities who were scouring the city to unearth the proposed den of iniquity never secured any clue from these people.

Our landlord and his friendly wife were our most active assistants. Mr. Rabinowitz spent hours of his own time

For, by this time, our location had been discovered and widely published. People began coming from far beyond Brownsville, not only from every part of New York and Brooklyn, the East Side, Manhattan, the Bronx, Long Island, Staten Island, Coney Island, but from New Jersey and New England as well. One young carpenter came from Philadelphia to tell Margaret Sanger about an invalid wife and three children born dead.

That receiving room of ours was the livest social service office I have ever seen. Two jovial policemen called each morning—and discussed the weather. The postman never forgot his exclamation of wonder with each day's offering of fifty to a hundred letters and never left without his cheery: "Farewell, ladies. Hope I find you here to-morrow." Then there was the friendly chat with the daily gath-



adding touches here and there to make the two bright and spotless clinic rooms more snow-white still—"more scientific looking," as he said. His wife gave out handbills to every person who passed the door and also to the mothers who came to the Babies' Dispensary across the way, so that every woman who applied there for help in the care of her babies was told of the other help across the street. Later, when the work became so overwhelming that we could not go out for lunch or supper, we were sure to hear, as the day wore on, Mrs. Rabinowitz call downstairs: "If I bring a little tea now, will you stop the people coming?"

Stop the people coming? Nothing, not even the ghost of Anthony Comstock, could have stopped those people from coming! All day long, and far into the evening, in ever increasing numbers they came—a hundred women and a score of men on our banner day.

ering of reporters, always speculating on how much longer we'd "last." And the visits from neighbors to wish us good luck—the grocer's wife on the corner, the widow with six children who kept the lunchroom down the street, the fat old German baker with his daily donation of doughnuts and an occasional foreign-born doctor to say he hoped all would go well with us.

It seemed cruel to ask those women—their need was so obvious—even the simple facts we wanted for our records: name and address, nationality, number of children, husband's trade and earnings. But these everyday questions touched a spring that let loose a flood of experience so real, so deep, that you felt you were looking at life for the first time. So much cold truth, so many hopeless facts to show how little there was in life for these people, such heartbreaking confidences in response to a word of sympathy,

that you came, at the end of the day, to wonder how the world could go on with so much sadness in it.

To Miss Mindell and me these women told the constantly reiterated but ever varying story of low wages and high rent, of irregular employment and steadily rising prices for beans and lentils, of no work at all and a diet of black bread and black coffee. They told us of so-called homes with two rooms and only one window, with two beds for a family of seven, three cots and a soap-box for eight children, of years of heavy toil by fine, hopeful men and women with, at the end, only sickness, funerals, debts—stories of wives broken in health and husbands broken in spirit, sons sent to prison and daughters to prostitution, and always the helpless tale of children that were not wanted but came in never-ending numbers.

Newly married couples, with little but faith, hope and love to go on, told of the wee flat they had chosen, of his low wages and her still lower earnings, but of their determination to work it out together if only the children would not come too soon.

Wrecks of women came just to tell their tragedies to Margaret Sanger and urge her to save other women from the sorrow of ruined health, overworked husbands and broods of sickly, defective and wayward children growing up on the streets, filling the dispensaries and hospitals and filing through the juvenile court.

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

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

When I asked a bright little 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. That's 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 funerals in our house. I am thirty-six years old." She looked 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?"

A socially significant group were the puzzled, groping women, misled and bewildered in a tangled jungle of popular superstitions, old wives' remedies and horse-block advice—all the ignorant sex teaching of the poor, their 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 here 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.

The inflexible rule of the clinic in this respect did not, of course, prevent the fabrication of slanderous rumors, for which, however, even the searching investigation of the authorities failed to find the slightest confirmation. The records of the four clinic trials do not contain a shred of evidence or a word of testimony to bear out the malicious charge of malpractice.

The woman detective who finally brought to an end the clinic's usefulness had no trouble in learning all there was to know. Mrs. Whitehurst, a police matron, walked into the clinic one morning with a borrowed baby and an old shawl thrown over a stylish suit. Looking very well fed and comfortable, she told Miss Mindell a terrible tale of many children, many abortions and a superhumanly terrible husband. To Mrs Byrne she told a similar story, but with accidental modifications.

Miss Mindell and Mrs. Byrne understood. All the contraceptive methods known to Mrs. Sanger were told to this representative of the law. She was shown the equipment of the clinic and even the plans for the birth control movement were explained to her.

She insisted upon purchasing part of the equipment used for demonstrating, which, notwithstanding Mr. Sumner's gratuitous insinuations to the contrary, was sold to her for just what it had cost Mrs. Sanger. Her two-dollar bill was pasted on a sheet of paper, labeled "spy money" and pinned to the wall, where the police found and seized it when they raided the clinic on October 26th.

No one else purchased anything but friendly counsel and instruction, which was "sold" for the nominal registration fee of ten cents—to such as could pay that much.

As Mrs. Whitehurst left that morning, she paused in the outer office to listen to the conversation of some women waiting their turn:

"I was the youngest of twelve. My mother died when I was born."

"I married at fifteen. We have had fourteen children. Eight are dead."

"I have never been well since my first baby came. My children are all poorly and my man he has the consumption."

I have often wondered if Mrs. Whitehurst liked her profession that day.