

who was Margaret Sanger?

Margaret Sanger was a prominent leader in the eugenics and birth control movements that eventually led to the decriminalization of contraception and abortion. As a chief architect of the modern Culture of Death, Sanger's legacy now includes the deaths of more than 40 million innocent, surgically aborted children in the United States alone.

Personal life

Margaret Louise Higgins was born in Corning, N.Y., on September 14, 1879—the sixth of 11 children. Her father was a vocal advocate of socialism and a critic of the Catholic Church who, by Sanger's own admission, had a great impact on her education.¹ Her mother was a Catholic and Margaret was apparently baptized into the Church, though she abandoned it later in life.

In 1900, she began training to be a nurse but discontinued it soon after her 1902 marriage to architect William Sanger. They had three children. Prior to her 1921 divorce, she had at least three extramarital affairs.² In 1922, Sanger married the elderly J. Noah Slee, whose Three-in-One Oil fortune gave Sanger financial independence to pursue her birth control and eugenic goals.

Planned Parenthood founder

Planned Parenthood Federation of America traces its beginning to 1916, when Sanger opened America's first birth control clinic in Brooklyn, N.Y. She was arrested under a New York law that forbade the dissemination of birth control information. Two years earlier, she was indicted under a federal statute for sending birth control information through the U.S. mail.

Eugenics and birth control

Sanger's periodical, *The Birth Control Review*, passionately promoted eugenics, the belief that the human race could be improved if certain people did not reproduce. Typical of this philosophy was an April 1924 article in which Sanger likens eugenics to what a gardener or a farmer does with plants and animals:

"How are we to breed a race of human thoroughbreds unless we follow the same plan? We must

*make this country into a garden for children instead of a disorderly back lot overrun with human weeds."*³

In her book, *Woman and the New Race* (Eugenics Publishing Company, 1923) Sanger summed up the relationship between eugenics and birth control:

"Birth control itself, often denounced as a violation of natural law, is nothing more or less than the facilitation of the process of weeding out the unfit, of preventing the birth of defectives or of those who will become defectives" (p. 229).

Sterilizations, segregation

In her 1932 Plan for Peace, Sanger wanted "to apply a stern and rigid policy of sterilization and segregation to that grade of population whose progeny is already tainted, or whose inheritance is such that objectionable traits may be transmitted to offspring." She also wanted to take an inventory of "illiterates, paupers, unemployables, criminals, prostitutes, dope-fiends" and "segregate them on farms and open spaces as long as necessary for the strengthening and development of moral conduct."⁴ Similar types of eugenic thinking were found in Nazi Germany.

Sanger's talk to the Klan

In her 1938 autobiography, Margaret Sanger describes a talk she gave to the women's branch of the Ku Klux Klan at Silver Lake, N.J. She summed up how well she got along with this KKK group:

*"A dozen invitations to speak to similar groups were proffered. The conversation went on and on, and when we were finally through it was too late to return to New York."*⁵

The Negro Project

Among the many insidious initiatives associated with Sanger was The Negro Project. Conceived by Dr. Clarence Gamble, the main idea was to recruit charismatic black ministers who would encourage black women to

practice birth control, thereby reducing the number of black babies being born. In a December 10, 1939, letter, Sanger wrote to Dr. Gamble:

*"We do not want the word to go out that we want to exterminate the Negro population and the minister is the man who can straighten that idea out if it ever occurs to any of their more rebellious members."*⁶

Scientific racism

In 1985, Esther Katz of New York University's history department formed the Margaret Sanger Papers Project to locate, arrange, edit, research and publish Sanger's papers. Here's an excerpt from an article, "The Sanger-Hitler Equation," that appeared in the Winter 2002/3 *Margaret Sanger Papers Project Newsletter*:

"Sanger did write to and share organizational memberships and conference programs with any number of eugenicists, including such champions of scientific racism as Charles Davenport and Harry Laughlin, who ran the genetics laboratory in Cold Spring Harbor, New York; and Leon Whitney, secretary of the American Eugenics Society. All of them conflated physical and mental deficiencies with racial ones. While Sanger publicly criticized these most notable eugenicists for their opposition or indifference to birth control, she never publicly condemned their racial views."

Sanger on large families

In her book, *Woman and the New Race*, Margaret Sanger wrote:

"Many, perhaps, will think it idle to go farther in demonstrating the immorality of large families, but since there is still an abundance of proof at hand, it may be offered for the sake of those who find difficulty in adjusting old-fashioned ideas to the facts. The most merciful thing that the large family does to one of its infant members is to kill it" (pp. 62-63).

Sanger and "The Pill"

As Sanger's efforts to promote contraception gained acceptance during the 1940s, she turned her attention to creating a birth control pill. Sanger's Planned Parenthood gave steroid biologist Gregory Pincus grants totaling \$21,000 between 1949 and 1952 to help her reach her

goal. In 1952, Sanger also met with the wealthy Katherine Dexter McCormick, who left \$1 million for the pill project in her will. Testing began in 1956, using poor women in Puerto Rico as test subjects. By 1960 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the pill,⁷ setting the stage for the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

Sanger's death and legacy

Sanger died in Tuscon, Ariz., on September 6, 1966, and is buried in the Slee family plot in the Fishkill Rural Cemetery in Dutchess County, N.Y. She lived to see the Supreme Court endorse her life's crusade in 1965 when, in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, the justices defined a Constitutional right to privacy and declared the law against contraception unconstitutional. This case forms the basis for the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion as well as the 2003 decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* that struck down the Texas sodomy law.

Today, Sanger's Planned Parenthood is the United States's largest abortion provider, having reported performing 3,548,791 abortions from 1977 through 2003. In 2004, PPFA claimed to be operating 849 clinics in all but two states (North Dakota and Mississippi). From 1987 to 2004, the organization reported a total income of more than \$9.2 billion, with nearly \$3.6 billion coming from government grants and contracts.⁸ Planned Parenthood still honors its founder, bestowing annual Maggie Awards in her name.

¹ Katz, Ester, *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger, Vol. 1* (University of Illinois Press, 2003), pp. xxiii-xxiv.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 18, 272, 313.

³ Sanger, Margaret, "The Meaning of Radio Birth Control," text of a broadcast by Sanger on WFAB radio in Syracuse, N.Y., on February 29, 1924. Published in *Birth Control Review*, April 1924, pp. 110-111.

⁴ Sanger, Margaret, "A Plan for Peace," *Birth Control Review*, April 1932, pp. 107-108.

⁵ Sanger, Margaret, *Margaret Sanger An Autobiography*, 1971 reprint by Dover Publications, Inc., of the 1938 original published by W.W. Norton, pp. 366-367.

⁶ Donovan, Charles and Marshall, Robert, *Blessed Are the Barren: The Social Policy of Planned Parenthood*, (Ignatius Press, 1991), pp. 17-18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 211-214

⁸ Planned Parenthood Federation of America, *Service Reports 1987, 1994, Annual Reports 1987 - 2003/04*.



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