Italian Women Speak Up For Abortion

Divorce was finally legalized in Catholic Italy on May 12, 1974, carried by the women's vote. Ferment continues on the abortion question.

Edith Schloss

She sits behind a table with other women facing an audience. Behind them one banner on the wall reads: "Movimento Femminista" (feminist movement) and another: "Aborto Libero E Gratuito" (abortion by choice and gratis). The incessant puffs of sound and light from the press photographers' flashes hover around her like insects. She makes no bones about her excitement: "I am nervous today. . . " she begins. After the other women have told the photographers to moderate themselves she continues with a Venetian lilt in her friendly, straight-forward voice: "First of all I want to tell you that nobody put me on to this. I am not being instructed by anybody as some have said. After my experiences I have come to my own conclusions. My case is a concrete case. It concerns all women and all society."

Gigliola Pierobon, called Lola by her friends, unemployed factory worker, age 23 and mother of a three-year-old, is before a group of feminists, women and men journalists at a press conference because six years ago in 1967, when she was hardly 17, she had an illegal abortion and must stand trial for it in Padua on June 5th.

It is calculated that every year up to five million Italian women submit to practices terminating pregnancy (in Milan about 500 a day). Out of the 400 cases prosecuted yearly, only 50 get convicted. Though there is usually a suspended sentence, it constitutes a criminal record which bars the individual from government or other public employment and so from any pension. Should the law ever catch up with her or him again, they are liable to a doubly heavy sentence.

The trials on so thorny a problem are usually dispatched with the least publicity in a couple of hours, "as if they had caught a chicken thief," as Lola puts it. "They have already made my private affairs public. But the fight against those old abortion laws will not be the main point of my trial. I want it to be political. Through my case I have seen what the system is like. I want others to see it too."

She was born in 1950 in San Martino di Lupari, a village of 9,000 near Padua in the Po plain in the Venetian hinterland. Her story, partly the way she tells it to the press conference, partly as she tells it to me the next day, is this:

"My family work on the land and tend cattle for land owners. I liked learning. When I was 11 years old like all Italian school children I had to write an essay on one of three subjects: The Importance of Trees. The Benefits of Milk. Traffic Accidents. Mine, the best paper, won me a trip to Rome, but since the teacher had already been there, she didn't want to bother to go again in order to take me. And when my mother, happy and proud of my first prize, asked her if now maybe I could go and study at the university, this teacher replied in front of everyone: 'That would be a waste. If she were *my* daughter, mine, the wife of the mayor, it would be different. But you are poor peasants. Therefore, for Lola to study would be useless. She has no future.' You can imagine I still remember this as the worst day of my life!"

When she was 14 the local priest organized a meeting where another woman teacher was to instruct teenage girls about the facts of life. "She explained menstruation to us and how babies come out. Not where men came in. She only said, 'Man is important in this matter but I'll tell you why when you get older.' "

So Lola had no idea of contraception when at 17 she got to know a salesman in a shop who was 26. "He impressed me because he seemed so much more mature and sure of himself than me. We stayed together (had intercourse) only once."

When she found herself pregnant and went to tell her partner, he gave the classical answer "He said he was not the type to get girls in trouble. He knew what he was doing. It must have been someone else. I couldn't tell my parents. On the contrary it was because of them I decided to abort. In our small village I was afraid to become the shame of the family."

A young student she knew found her an abortionist and gave her 30,000 lire (about $50) to pay her.

"I expected a regular midwife but the woman was really only a doctor's assistant. She induced the abortion with a catheter, without any anaesthesia, on the bare marble kitchen table. Then, taking two trains and riding three kilometers on a bicycle, I got home. I had no money left over to buy the antibiotics as the 'midwife' had told me to.

So I got an infection. Later I found out that 90% of cases of catheter abortions become sterile. My mother found out. And she was behind me totally. Without her I wouldn't have gone through any of this. And luckily a gynecologist who asked no questions cured me in the end.

"Probably with half a million lire (about $1,000) I could have gone to a private nursing home and all would have been cool. I guess in that case the police wouldn't have bothered either. But in a little place like San Martino everybody knows everybody else's business and somehow they got wind of it.

"I was called before the state attorney. That time and later I went all alone; they said it wasn't serious enough to bring a lawyer and in any case we had no money for one. They said it was just a little thing, just a few questions and then everything was going to be alright. And they knew everything anyway.

"So, being just a square, ignorant kid who believed in justice I told them absolutely everything.

"The second time it was the carabinieri who called me. After they made me confirm my signed confession of the time before, this type wanted to know the details of the abortion. Did I sit or lie. Were my legs open. What did the midwife do with her hands. What did I feel exactly. Well, I gave answers to this pig because I thought I had to.

"The third time and two years later at the police station a doctor examined me for traces of the operation. She was a woman, but it was awful just the same."

And all these people addressed her with "Tu", the form used for inferiors and criminals, not the courtesy "Lei" due a decent citizen.

Eventually she and the student who helped her got married. It was 1969 when she became pregnant again. This time she wanted the baby. The birth in the middle of the night at a public hospital ward lacerated her badly. And when the doctor finally arrived at 9:30 a.m., the local anaesthesia had worn off so that she was stitched up without it.

When she got over the exhaustion following all this, she had to go to work in a men's clothing factory (which today is under investigation for unsanitary working conditions). Her mother got sick and she gave up her job. Since Lola's marriage hadn't worked out, she and her daughter went to live with her family. Not having bothered with the formalities of a legal separation, a factual one was enough to cut her off from social security, health insurance and other benefits. (This is one of the reasons that despite the new laws, few couples get divorced.)

"And nobody gives me work. Not because of my troubles with the law but because they prefer to employ women without children. Mothers cost the "padrone" more.

"Now they want to punish me for having refused to put an illegitimate child into the world when I was practically a child myself . . . there is so much talk about respect for life . . . what kind of life would this poor thing have had? A misfit before it was born, put into one of those concentration camp type foundling homes first, and into reform school next. But now that I *had* a wanted child, nobody would even let me support it."

After Lola, her lawyer begins to speak to the press conference. Bianca Guidetti Serra explains that she will base Lola's defense on a declaration of "stato di necessità" (state of duress, the stress of circumstance). "She was forced into abortion because of her social condition as part of a rural family without means to support an added member for which society would in no way feel responsible. Abortion is indeed a violation, but I argue it is a violation against the individual who submits to it because society compels it to."

The lawyer's statement is followed by testimonies and discussion by a woman doctor, a writer and several supporters from the feminist movement. The long morning, more stimulating and friendly than most press conferences, draws to a close. The atmosphere has been tense throughout. Sympathy with Lola is tinged with a comradely solidarity, a special feeling among women who needed to rely on each other without their men through the misfortunes of their country's history and are today still inhibited by the oldest male dominated customs in Europe.

Lola readily agrees to give me an interview the next day to clear up some points.

Rome, May 11, 1973

I find her sitting in the cafe in Piazza Navona as arranged, clearly enjoying the headlines of the newspapers in her lap which are all about herself. "Look here, they call me sweet and bashful. Me, sweet and bashful?" She laughs. "Here, look, that's better: at ease among her comrades. Anything but the poor hick." She looks around at the people at the other tables reading the same headlines and chuckles. "And they don't know it's me, right here."

She is enchanted with Rome's easy outdoor life, but not impressed when taken to her first concert of modern music. This girl with unhurried gestures and natural behavior wasn't born yesterday. She knows what she is up against and what she is doing. She can slyly evade questions I have no business to ask, while knowing at the same time when to confide in me as another woman. She discusses all questions pertaining to her case with intelligence.

For instance, in regard to Marie Claire Chevalier of Bobigny in France, another abortion case which became notorious, she says this: "She didn't fight on her own. *Choisir* women's magazine did it for her. It was well done and had the success we know, but it concerned itself with abortion only. I want my case to be more than that—a fight for all women and a political case." Neither has she any use for the new abortion laws as proposed by Senator Fortuna: "It's another instance where it's up to men to decide. And who can struggle through all that red tape but a woman with an informed middle class husband, not the working woman who needs it most. And I wonder how it would ever get to a village like mine where even today only the pharmacist's daughter knows of the existence of the pill?"

We go over the newspapers. The article in the reactionary *Il Resto del Carlino* is as condescending as could be expected: "this girl traipsing all over the country giving press conferences like a starlet is only a very simple peasant. . . ." The rest of the articles are surprisingly clear

and sympathetic, except for the *Unità*, the Communist party organ, which resorts to journalese rhetoric: "It is dangerous to blow up a moment in a woman's life beyond proportion . . . so it determines her future . . . regardless of her past. . . ." Lola says with annoyance, "What do they mean?" Then: "Look at this: 'The freedom of abortion simply asked by the woman on her own is . . . a splinter action . . . to be avoided at any cost . . . abortion and everything else is harmful unless controlled on the level of scientific structuring. . . .' " Lola cries, "But they haven't understood 'un cazzo' . . .," then reflects, "or maybe they have, only too well, and are confusing on purpose. You can tell the C.P. is against abortion; like the church, they want more kiddies. They are against the women's movement too. The other night in Florence the women and men inside the party beat each other up. Yes, while the comrade is out 'fighting for the oppressed,' the wife has to stay home to do the dishes."

When a communist acquaintance asks me outside a shop where Lola is buying picture postcards for her family if her husband was bourgeois or a comrade, this puzzles me. But when I later tell Lola, she knows: "The comrade wanted to find out if a politically minded man had instructed and taught me. He couldn't conceive of a woman who could think for herself."

The Communist party is made up of older workers, ex-partisans and the children of both, who belong to it traditionally. More recent members recruited from the middle class are rather like liberals in America. By now its order and dogma exactly fits the mentality of Italians misled from birth by the church. More, the "party" does not want to cross the church in any way because most of its members at the same time are also practicing Catholics; Italian communists have no qualms about getting married or christened in church or even going to mass, unlike their comrades in other countries.

So the younger, more enlightened people have become extremely critical of the C.P. They are Marxist oriented, however, and belong to radical groups called "extra parlimentari"—outside of parliament because their parties have no regular seat in it.

Practically all feminists have left wing background. But having learned through the hypocrisy of their men giving lip-service to the oppressed outside the home, but treating women the old, traditional way inside it, they were the first to be turned off by party politics. Being the first radical movement in this country without this kind of orthodoxy makes it especially interesting. It could be temporary but its "let us take up what comes along and act on it" approach—in this case joining the struggle for Lola—is a pragmatism which links it to a development with young people disenchanted by conventional politics all over the world.

Lola tells me she belongs to no special party. This working girl with little formal schooling, two injurious and traumatic operations and several uncouth police interrogations behind her, separated from her husband, the marked woman of her village and the mother of a baby she cannot support, could be one among millions.

And 5 or 10 years ago a girl even with her common sense would have been helpless and on the downgrade socially. But the women's movement has made the difference. She found it about a year ago. To her native wit—partly rural background, partly Italian practical sense—were added further insights. Though she takes nothing for granted, because of the women's movement she is turning toward her trial without apprehension.

Padua, June 6 & 7, 1973

The trial lasts two days instead of the usual two hours.

It is accompanied by protests. In the streets police are just in time to stop fascist youths from taking off their belts to beat up protesting women. In the courtroom when all the women suddenly burst into a chorus of "We all have aborted!" three leaders are singled out for future prosecution.

In the papers there is much comment on Lola's unheard-of appearance. No little signorina in her Sunday best trying meekly to appeal to the good "per bene" judges, she faces them in a sweat shirt and jeans, which alone are enough in Italy to proclaim a new and independent way of life.

Exposing her bitter experiences to make them work against the ignorance, poverty and rigid customs which reduce maternity to a drama in her country, she must first of all be herself.

It is no picnic. "I didn't recognize the person they were talking about," she says later. "It was me, filthied, an object. It is horrible to listen to men in black togas having discussions with other men in black togas about your morals, your cystitises, your feelings, your womb, the way you straddled your legs. . . ."

In Italy a first trial is run by a tribunal of three professional magistrates plus prosecutor; at the second—the appeal—there are five magistrates plus prosecutor. Only in grave cases in the third trial the "Corte D'Assise" not only consists of two magistrates and prosecutor but a jury of six chosen from the people as well.

In this first trial much seems to hinge on whether or not Lola is repentant. She is not; on the contrary she calmly asserts she had a right to her abortion.

At 11 p.m. on June 7 she is pronounced guilty, but because she was a minor at the time of the abortion she is declared repentant and therefore pardoned.

And now something happens which has never happened before.

Lola appeals *against* her pardon.

One of her lawyers, Todeschi, declares that because the case has been narrowed down to technical details alone, without regard for its social context, Lola has been denied a proper trial. More, she has been pronounced guilty of a crime which could not exist. Article 546 of the penal code was created under fascism by one called Rocco to "protect the integrity of the stock"—a racist concept meaning "mass is power" (more kiddies—more cannon fodder) which is in contradiction with seven articles of the constitution. To begin with the one of equality of all citizens, because a woman of means who can afford an abortion abroad is never prosecuted, while a poor girl who cannot gets accused. The tribunal, not inclined to innovation and aware

of the implications of a more explicit verdict as a precedent, has resorted to a paternalistic expedient which has nothing to do with legal reality.

In refusing to accept the hand-out of clemency, in forcing into the open an outmoded law and other judicial discrepancies, the case has stirred up enough controversy so that for two days there is not a newspaper in the country which does not carry it in its headlines.

It has implicated three other women. More women all over the country are implicating themselves, risking loss of jobs and social benefits by signing declarations that they too have had abortions. Lola herself faces years in jail when her next trial which she insists upon comes up. The case has challenged the authorities.

Not abortion alone, nor the position of women, of the family or of the law, but *all* of these have become a public issue in Italy now.

POST SCRIPT

Rome, October 1, 1974

Yesterday Gigliola Pierobon's book came out. It is called *The Trial of the Angels* (*Il Processo Degli Angeli*, published by Tattilo, Rome) because in popular parlance unborn (aborted) babies are said to go straight to heaven. The book is a sober account of Lola's personal experiences, her political awakening and her trial.

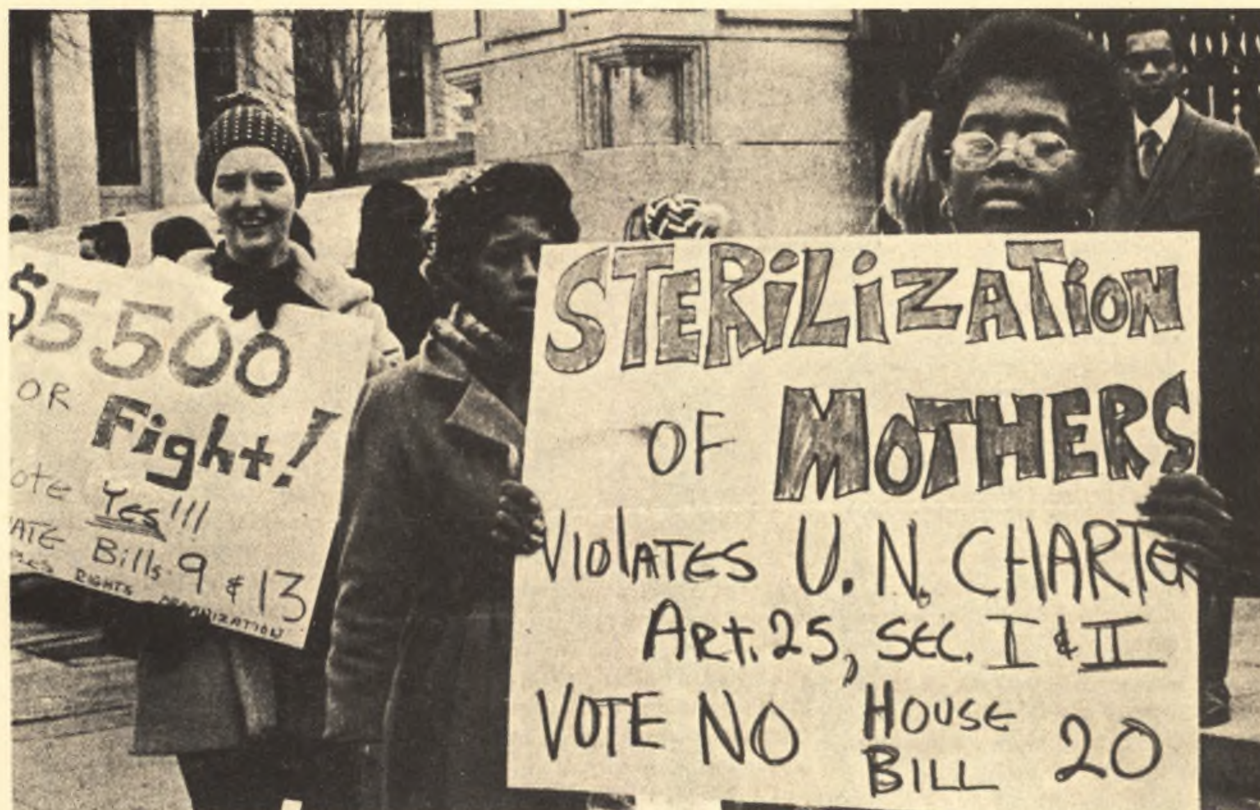
I phone Lola in Bologna where—because it is the center of a lively agrarian region and governed by relatively advanced civic laws—she was most likely to find work. But it turns out even here her past is against her. "First I found no work because I was morally suspect," she tells me, "and now I find no work because I'm politically suspect—even in communist Bologna." When I ask, "You mean—though you are left wing, you have no use for the Communist Party?" she only laughs.

By now the Communist Party, which has been on the verge of taking a lead in Italian government several times this year, is considered quite mild, hardly above social democracy and certainly not revolutionary, by young radicals.

And the second trial she asked for? No date has been set at all. Lara Foletti, who helped Lola with her book, says parliament wants to keep the lowest profile possible on the abortion question. "It won't even come to a discussion of it in parliament . . . We had a week long hunger strike of women outside the senate (in Piazza Navona in Rome) in June, to draw attention to it again. Now at Trento (in the North, near the Austrian border) 263 women have been accused of aborting. Thirty of them have decided to take a political stand and fight like Lola. Their trial is imminent."

The women of Italy are determined. They understand very well that the question of abortion is awkward to *all* existing parties—inside and outside of parliament, reactionary or revolutionary—because *all* are dominated by men still in the thrall of age old male traditions.

Because women have nothing to lose here they have the freest and most undogmatic approach to politics of any group in Italy.



The Southern Patriot

Welfare Women picket Capitol, Louisville, Ky.