

1963: Ursula U.

One of the women on whom my father performed an abortion is Ursula U. I discovered this by accident, when I met her during the 2002 referendum campaign. I found her story particularly affecting, because she was born in the same year as me. I asked to meet her to talk about her experiences. We met in her comfortable, tastefully and colourfully decorated home, that is surrounded by a garden of wildflowers. The 65-year old radiated vitality and self-confidence while she told me her story.

Ursula married at 21, after she got pregnant – from heavy petting! It was a love-match. She had known her husband for years. Her future mother-in-law wanted to take Ursula to Milan for an abortion: she was afraid that marrying so young, and having a child so soon, would jeopardize her son's future. Ursula refused: she was happy about the baby. Through rigorous saving and very strained finances she and her husband built up a small business together.

Just three months after her daughter was born, Ursula fell pregnant again. Neither the contraceptive pessary prescribed by her doctor nor regular temperature-taking had been any use. "I was just terribly fertile", she says, laughing.

When just four months after her second daughter was born, she found herself pregnant again, Ursula was at the end of her tether. She rushed from doctor to doctor asking for help, but without success – in Lucerne in 1960, terminating a pregnancy was out of the question. She consulted a psychiatrist in Zürich, but even there met with only moralising lectures and humiliation.

With the help of a friend of her husband who lived in Bern, she gathered together what she needed for a way out: "You got yourself a catheter and a long-necked glass bottle. You split the bottle in two using a red-hot wire. The sharp edge you cover with sticking plaster. You boil the bottle and catheter for 15 minutes. I had to wash myself thoroughly inside and out. The person performing the abortion scrubbed his hands for 10 minutes. Then the neck of the bottle is inserted into the vagina. The cervix can then be seen clearly through the neck of the bottle, like through a gynaecologist's speculum. The catheter, a soft plastic tube, is then gently fed through the cervix, about 4cm into the womb. Armed with a sterile towel and tight-fitting underpants I then had to walk around, and move about until I started getting period cramps and bleeding. The bleeding was a little heavier than a normal period, and with the bleeding the embryo was expelled, although despite looking for it I was never able to find after my abortions which were in the sixth to eighth week of pregnancy. It was really all quite simple and I don't think that

it was really dangerous.”

To prevent herself getting pregnant again, she then tried using a coil she had made herself, which she got a doctor put in for her (as a dental technician she had made such coils before, out of dental gold, under contract for the same doctor). But this method of contraception didn't work for her either. Twice more, she induced an abortion with the help of her husband, the way that she had learned. In 1962 she gave birth to her third daughter. Then she wanted to be sterilised. She was told that at 25 she was much too young for that, that it wasn't allowed in Switzerland for women under thirty – which of course wasn't true, because even then there was no law on sterilisation.

“You are not a hussy”

Eleven months later she was pregnant again. But this time she couldn't get her do-it-yourself abortion method to work. The wife of the friend in Bern gave her the name of a gynaecologist there who “did that sort of thing”, so she went to see him. He referred her to a psychiatrist for assessment. This she found a humiliating and hypocritical charade. But she received a “positive” assessment, because she threatened to otherwise perform an abortion herself. The private clinic where the gynaecologist worked restricted him to performing not more than one termination in every six operations, so he referred her to my father for the procedure.

She received a very warm and friendly reception from my mother and father. The short procedure was carried out under local anaesthetic and was virtually pain-free. Afterwards my mother served her coffee and sat down with her and talked reassuringly to her. She said she understood only too well that women like Ursula were not frivolous hussies. She behaved like a mother to her, Ursula said. And Ursula thought the fee very reasonable.

A few days later she was sterilised by the Bern gynaecologist in the private clinic. The nursing staff reproached her and moralised, but Ursula was thankful that it was all over and never had any regrets. No, she was not catholic and neither was she a practising protestant, she replied to my question. But she loved nature and believed in creation.

She said that, with the self-induced abortions, there was above all a terrible fear of being caught if something went wrong, because you could be prosecuted for it. She had always quite sensibly thought out beforehand what explanation she would give if she had to seek medical treatment. The speculum that she had made for herself, she hid in a can of milk powder, in case the house should be searched. She changed doctor whenever another pregnancy was confirmed, to avoid incriminating questions about where she had given birth etc.

Ursula later discovered through friends, acquaintances and relatives, that inducing an abortion in this way was very common practice. She knew of no woman who had considered it murder: when the pregnancy was not more than two and a half months along, it tended to be experienced as an induced period.

In 1985 a people's initiative misleadingly entitled "For the right to life" was put to the vote in Switzerland. Ursula feared the initiative might be adopted if women did not unite to oppose it. So she campaigned through protests and in the press, in which she spoke publicly about her abortions. As a residence councillor of a catholic community and owner of what had become a sizeable business, this took a great deal of courage. "I hoped to be able to make a contribution to ensuring that this inhumane initiative was forcefully thrown out. I didn't want my fate to be repeated". She met with many positive reactions. Ursula was also closely involved in the 2002 campaign for the "Fristenregelung" (legalization of abortion on demand of the pregnant woman within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy).

Extract from the chapter entitled "My Father, Gynaecologist in Burgdorf" in the book "Die Erzeugelmacherin – das 30-jährige Ringen um die Fristenregelung. Memoiren" ("The Angel maker – the 30 year struggle for the legalisation of abortion. Memoirs.") by Anne-Marie Rey, published in 2007 by Xanthippe Verlag, Zürich.