

The Self-Incrimination of Matilde Maciocia

The following document is an example of an “autodenuncia”, a public admission of having broken a law, a form of civil disobedience which activists for the depenalization of abortion in France, Germany and Italy adopted in the 1970’s. The author, Matilde Maciocia, was an ordinary young Roman woman who later became an activist in the Italian Radical Party. Her statement was published in the original Italian, “Autodenuncia di Matilde Maciocia” in La Prova Radicale, anno I, n. 2, inverno 1972, p. 184.

My name is Matilde Maciocia. The reason that I have publicly declared that I had an abortion comes from understanding that thousands of women have undergone similar traumatic experiences. I was 20 years old and already had a baby only a few months old; my husband was still going to university and wasn’t working; the weight of the family was entirely on my shoulders when I became pregnant again. It is logical that in these conditions I couldn’t bring another child into the world. I didn’t have the means to go to a gynecologist, much less a clinic, and so through an acquaintance I turned to an illegal abortionist.

The woman came, she must have been fifty or so, with a rough manner and coarse appearance; she wasn’t even a nurse if you ask me. The “operation” was done on the kitchen table in my house. The woman, in a hurried manner lacking any tact, introduced the probe that she brought with her wrapped in gauze, not even disinfected or sterilized. She just said, “When it comes out in about twenty hours, wrap it up and flush it down the toilet”.

She left me only a telephone number and took 10,000 lire.¹ After twenty hours I started having atrocious pains that lasted about two hours. Then the fetus came out with a spurt of blood that didn’t stop. I felt terrible, but I thought at least that it was all over, that I would have a heavy menstruation and then would be normal again. Instead, the pains continued and became unbearable; by the evening I had a very high fever. Then I really started to be frightened. I didn’t have the money to go to a doctor, I would have to go to the hospital and run the risk of being prosecuted.

So I called the number that the abortionist had left me, but it was a false number. Not knowing what to do, I called a friend of my husband, a third-year medical student, not very skilled, but shocked by my condition and he gave me antibiotic injections. The fever did not break and the pains were still very bad and I continued to lose blood mixed with scraps of placenta. This situation continued for a few days until, terrified, I decided to go to the hospital. I knew that they could not denounce me because they could not demonstrate that I’d procured an abortion; I said that it had been a spontaneous miscarriage. The doctors knew well what had happened, but not having proof they

¹ Roughly \$70 US today.

pretended to believe me. They did a scraping, lasting about fifteen minutes. Then they cleaned me up and sent me home.

The fever stopped and I had a normal menstruation. It seemed that everything was fine, but the next month I had a very long menstruation of eight days of a heavy, hemorrhagic type. I went back to see a doctor and was diagnosed with an infection of the uterus, endometritis, caused by the abortion done in such a bestial manner. They did another scraping, again without sedation, this time because I didn't have the money to pay for an anesthesiologist. They told me that I would be sterile because the infection had caused the closure of my tubes. This experience was a profound drama for me and my husband and had a great influence on our sexual relations. For a long time after the abortion I was terrorized of having sex with my husband. In time, when our economic conditions improved we wanted to have another child and unconsciously I held him responsible for my sterility. For years I had terrible nightmares: I woke up screaming because I always dreamt of abortions, I dreamt of lakes of blood, I dreamt of dying, I dreamt of dead babies.

In particular, my sterility caused a profound depression, so profound that I had to go to recover in a psychiatric clinic, where I underwent five electroshock treatments. The neurologist there told me that if I had had a normal abortion I would not have suffered such trauma. My case is certainly not the only one, not even the worst. Going into poor neighborhoods to talk to women about contraception and to give them contraceptives, I met a woman who, at forty years old had undergone twelve abortions, had seven children, and made two suicide attempts. All of the abortions were done by a clandestine abortionist for a few thousand lire; many women had their wombs in tatters. Many desperate women tried to do it themselves. They had learned how and helped each other without even using a tube; they introduced a celery stalk or a piece of straw or a knitting needle into the uterus.

These thousands of women, all victims of a system that forces them to accept maternity at any cost and tramples on the rights of women to choose how and when to become mothers, have to find the courage to rebel against these unjust laws. I appeal to them because they can break the wall of silence that surrounds clandestine abortion.