

# Paul Krassner

## *When Abortion Was Against the Law*

I had become friends with Paul Jacobs, a radical union organizer, who was commissioned by the Health, Education and Welfare Department to write a paper, "Keeping the Poor Poor," for presentation at a social workers conference and to be included in a book on poverty. His analysis was prefaced by a Portuguese quotation: "If shit ever gets to have any value, the poor will be born without assholes." In *The Realist*, I applied that proverb to the subject of abortion:

"A poor woman has to undergo an unsuccessful hassle to get permission for a therapeutic – that is, a legal – abortion, even though she contracted German measles from a syphilitic cousin who raped her and then stole all her money plus the second-hand toys of her eighteen children, then calmed her down with tranquilizers containing thalidomide. Whereas, a wealthy woman can avoid having an unwanted offspring under safe and sanitary conditions *simply because she decided* not to have a baby. Why, she might conceivably go so far some day as to achieve the ultimate status symbol by obtaining an abortion when she isn't even pregnant."

There was an article in *Look* magazine that stated, "There is no such thing as a 'good' abortionist. All of them are in business strictly for money." But in the June 1962 issue of *The Realist*, I published an anonymous interview with Dr. Robert Spencer, a humane abortionist who was known as "The Saint." Patients came to his office in Ashland, Pennsylvania, from around the country. He had been performing abortions for forty years, started out charging five dollars, and never charged more than a hundred. He rarely used the word *pregnant*. Rather, he would say, "She was *that way*, and she came to me for help." He talked about "the voice of the uterus."

Ashland was a small town, and Dr. Spencer's work was not merely tolerated; the community *depended* on it – the hotel, the restaurant, the dress shop – all thrived on the extra business that came from his out-of-town patients. He built facilities at his clinic for Negro patients who weren't



allowed to obtain overnight lodgings elsewhere in Ashland. The walls of his office were decorated with those little wooden signs that tourists like to buy. A sign on the ceiling over his operating table said *Keep Calm*.