

A Fragment of History and a Tribute

By Bill W.

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Dr. A. Wiese Hammer, seventy-seven, and a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons, died at Philadelphia December 27th, 1956.

This simple account of the passing of one of America's finest surgeons stirs memories that will always be bright in the annals of Alcoholics Anonymous. Dr. A. Wiese Hammer was one of the best friends that AA will ever have.

Several of Philadelphia's old time members have written up the full story of Dr. Hammer and his benefactions. And here is the substance of what they had to say:

It was February, 1940. Jim, a New York AA, had just moved to Philadelphia and he was trying to get a local bookstore to carry the book "Alcoholics Anonymous" in their store. The bookstore's manager protested that his customers could have no possible interest in the book "Alcoholics Anonymous". As for himself, he couldn't care less.

Overhearing this turnaround, a lady standing nearby got into the act. She said she had sent "Alcoholics Anonymous" to her alcoholic nephew in Los Angeles. To the astonishment of the whole family, the problem boy had sobered up instantly and he had stayed that way for some three months. This was unheard of. Nevertheless, the bookstore manager remained unimpressed.

But when Helen Hammer heard of Jim's attempt to start the group at Philadelphia, her delight was boundless. She immediately led Jim and one of his new prospects to her surgeon husband.

Dr. Hammer in all that he undertook was a huge enthusiast. This full-blooded ruddy-faced man had a mighty zest for living which poured out of him right around the clock. And this joyous contagion he could spread to just about everybody he met. The moment he heard Jim's story about AA his good work for our society began at once. As we shall see, it was not confined to Philadelphia only; Dr. Hammer went to bat for us nationally at a time when AA had great need for this kind of good friend.

Here is what Dr. Hammer did: opened his home to all AA members – secured the Philadelphia Group its first meeting rooms – introduced us to Dr. Stouffer, another great friend-to-be, who was then Chief Psychiatrist at the Philadelphia General Hospital – secured us treatment and visiting privileges there – had AAs speak before the County Medical Society – along with his good wife, Helen, attended nearly every AA meeting for years – gave free medical and surgical aid to every AA who wanted it – visited other cities to talk about AA and paid the expenses of the Philadelphia members he took along – offered to buy the Philadelphia Group its first clubhouse (which had to be declined) – saw that his friend, Judge Curtis Bok, owner of the Saturday Evening Post, became interested in AA – and finally induced the Judge to assign Jack Alexander to do the famous article in 1941 that made our fellowship a national institution.

This is only an abbreviated list of Dr. Hammer's good works for our society. Doubtless hundreds of his benefactions will never be known, except to those individual sufferers to whom he was so notably kind.

Then, too, I find it impossible to write about Dr. Hammer without the happy recollection of Dr. Dudley Saul, another noted Philadelphia physician who constantly vied with Dr. Hammer in good works for us drunks.

To our intense astonishment – and always to our great benefit – these two great gentlemen fiercely competed with each other to figure out something bigger and better they could do for Alcoholics Anonymous. This is a great story in itself which I'm going to tell one of these days. How could AA in its infancy ever have survived without friends such as these – these Philadelphia physicians who worked shoulder to shoulder with Drs. Tiebout and Silkworth at New York?

To Helen Hammer I send AA's deepest sympathy and gratitude. And I often wonder what her memories of our early days must be.