

Asher Winkelstein (1893–1972)

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ASHER WINKELSTEIN (Fig.) was born in Syracuse into a music-loving, prosperous, middle class business family and spent his medical career at The Mount Sinai Hospital in a transitional period (1920–1950) just before the renaissance of modern gastroenterology. Educated at Syracuse University and the college of the medical school there, he served a two-year rotating internship at Mount Sinai and spent a year in a clinical laboratory, essentially a clinical pathology laboratory, under the volunteer direction of Dr. Emmanuel Libman. Dr. Winkelstein went into private practice after a preparatory period of 3½ years.

I first met him in 1939, when I arrived at Mount Sinai for my internship, and got to know him more closely after returning to Mount Sinai after World War II in 1950. Dr. Winkelstein's scientific training may have been fragmentary, but his curiosity was endless and he was intelligent, active and gifted. These qualities enabled him to make numerous significant clinical observations in gastroenterology. I never found out what directed him to gastroenterology, but I am sure two outstanding chiefs of surgery, Ralph Colp and John Garlock, who were interested in surgery for the treatment of peptic ulcer and diseases of the esophagus respectively, were major influences in his choice of a nonsurgical gastroenterology course.

It is necessary to realize the low status of gastroenterology in those years and understand that it took a considerable amount of courage to enter



Fig. Dr. Asher Winkelstein.

the field. The chief of medicine during my years at Columbia University's College of Physician and Surgeons (1935–1939) made clear his disdain for the field. Furthermore, from its founding, The Mount Sinai Hospital had never had an independent GI service, only a GI clinic, until the establishment of the current division in 1958 by Dr. Alexander B. Gutman, the first full-time head of medicine. Such distinguished clinicians and gastroenterologists as Burrill B. Crohn and Asher Winkelstein never made active medical ward rounds in the hospital, but served as chiefs of the

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GI clinic. Winkelstein, succeeding Crohn, was my own clinical chief during the years 1950–1958.

In his oral history, recorded by Dr. Albert Lyons, archivist of the hospital, in October 1965, following his retirement in 1958, Asher Winkelstein rated his most important findings in this order. The first was the invention of the milk drip therapy for ulcer and peptic esophagitis (chapter 4). The second was the description of peptic esophagitis, reported in 1934 at the Cleveland Meeting of the AMA in a paper entitled “Peptic Esophagitis: A New Clinical Evidence” (chapter 8). The third was his role, along with the young, soon-to-die Eugene Klein, in persuading Dr. Ralph Colp to perform anterior vagotomy along with gastroenterostomy for peptic ulcer disease (this occurred long before Dragdstedt had published his paper on bilateral vagotomy [chapter 10]). Finally, his studies of nocturnal acid secretion in peptic ulcer disease were a considerable advance (chapter 9). I would rate the description of peptic esophagitis as the most important of this group and outstanding in itself.

Dr. Winkelstein died in 1972. I am certain that, had he been alive today, Asher would have easily accepted the *Helicobacter pylori* theory of gastric and duodenal ulcer and gastritis. He greeted with enthusiasm the new advances that were just being made. He suffered from not having a laboratory under his control, and he proposed more experiments in an afternoon than a team of workers could accomplish in a lifetime, but he was never discouraged for long. Music was a great solace to him; Asher had been a talented amateur violinist and supported himself during college as head of a musical group.

According to his son, Asher felt his professional career had been a successful and a happy one, climaxed by his appointment as clinical professor of medicine and gastroenterology when the new medical school was founded at Mount Sinai. He was survived by his wife, Celia, for six years until she died at the age of 75, and also by his children, Charles, a Mount Sinai professor of psychiatry, and his daughter, Clara, an academic professor of education teaching at Roosevelt College in Chicago.