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Fragments of AA History

How AA Came to Rio de Janeiro

The story of AA in Rio began in June 1946, when Herb D., who had sobered up in Chicago in 1945, came to Rio on a three-year contract as an art director for an American advertising company. As a newcomer to the program, his immediate concern was to join a group in the city where he would be living for three years. But AA as a group was unknown in Rio then, and though he had the names of AA contacts in the city, they were all transients from the States. Since none of these AAs were planning to stay in Rio very long, they had not formed an ongoing group.

After many months of unsuccessful attempts, Herb turned to a new project, the translation into Portuguese of the AA pamphlets he had brought from the General Service Office in New York. He hoped to interest Brazilian drunks (and there were many in Rio then), and help himself stay sober by carrying the message and forming a Brazilian

group. Like alcoholics all over the world in those days, drunks in Brazil were considered a social nuisance, whose real place was in a psychiatric clinic or the police station.

Though Herb got the names of one or two drunks as prospects, none of them were bilingual. One of the Brazilians was Antonio, whom Herb met in 1947. Antonio sobered up and stayed sober — with some difficulty because of the lack of literature in Portuguese — until his death in an accident in 1951. The other Brazilians drifted away, and Herb still hungered for a group. His only meetings were those that could be held "hush-hush" in the homes of some of his fellow countrymen, who were sober but not ready to work toward the formation of AA in Brazil.

His greatest help was his wife, Libby, a nonalcoholic, who urged him to keep trying to form a group. Their correspondence with the General Service Office in New York was

voluminous, and Herb managed to get several articles in local newspapers in Rio.

Finally, in March 1948, through the goodwill of an Episcopal bishop in Rio, he met Harold W. Harold was an Anglo-Brazilian, a real hard-drinker, who had served with the British Army in World War II and, since returning to Rio in 1946, had managed to lose several jobs, get kicked out of his in-laws' home, lose his wife, and end up in the basement of his brother-in-law's home in the city of Niteroi, across the bay from Rio. The bishop and his brother arranged for a meeting between Herb and Harold on Saturday, March 13, 1948:

Herb told Harold his story, while Harold drank all that morning. Herb told him how he had been able to stop drinking by substituting pure water from the tap for the booze in his glass, sip by sip, until he was drinking only water — and how, after many unsuccessful attempts, he had been able to avoid refilling the glass with booze and taking the first drink. He talked about the day-by-day system, and the changes for the better in his personal and business life. He asked Harold to try the system and, when he stopped drinking, to try and translate as much as he could of the AA pamphlet Herb left for him.

The two agreed, tentatively, to meet at the ABI Building in the center of Rio, so that Harold could show Herb if he made any progress with the translation. And Harold passed out in the early hours of that Wednesday,

having taken his last drink on the basis of the sip-by-sip method.

Late that morning, Harold shaved and bathed, put on clean clothes, had some food with his brother-in-law's incredulous family, and set off — sober, but in terrible shape — to meet Herb, clutching a few pages he managed to translate. They met in the coffee room of the ABI Building, and a new period of one month was fixed for Harold to try and finish the translation so that Herb could print a Portuguese translation.

It took longer than that, but by the beginning of 1949, the AA pamphlet was printed and being sent to all who asked for it. By June 1949, when Herb returned to the U.S., there was a group of twelve AAs sober and meeting regularly every Monday evening in a small room at the YMCA. Herb first called the group D——'s Dehydrated Dozen; then it became AA—Rio Nucleus, the Grupo Proviouro de AA do Rio de Janeiro.

From this small beginning, and with the efforts of many dedicated AAs, the Fellowship in Brazil has grown to an estimated total of 100,000 sober alcoholics. Old-timers like Luiz M. in Rio, the oldest Brazilian recovering alcoholic with 38 years of sobriety, and Theophilo, with 32 years, in Niteroi where Herb and Harold met, swell the ranks of AAs who made it all happen. Now complete with a national board and an active service structure, Brazilian AA grows steadily, day by day.

Harold W., Sao Paolo, Brazil