

My Uncle "Doc:" Abraham Starr
Renee Marks Cohen

In Pittsburgh, instead of going to a doctor, my family usually consulted Doc, my mother's oldest brother who was an internist. After he entered medical school, he was always called "Doc" instead of Abe. Doc Starr was a quiet, serious, modest man, not tall, and with a gray moustache. Late in life he married Helen, who had worked for him as an office assistant and then became his companion.

He came over to check my grandmother's health when she lived with us. He pulled the underneath part of her eye down to look at her eye. He showed her how to clench and unclench her fingers to keep her hands and fingers limber. He was with us when she died at 72 after feeling nauseous. She was lying on the bathroom floor. Doc cried, saying, "Ma, Ma."

When I was little, Doc showed me how the muscle of his arm could move when he lifted his eyebrows. He didn't like to say anything negative or startling to children. Doc told me two stories about his service in the Navy as a physician during World War II: When the Japanese suicide bombers were visible in the sky near his ship, he was on deck when he saw them, and put his cigar in his mouth backward and pooped in his pants. Once, in the interior of the ship, he heard loud noises and thought he was shot, but it was his helmet knocking against the ceiling of the passageway. Coincidentally, he served on the S.S. Star, a ship that picked up the wounded in the Pacific and brought them back to the U.S. The ship was named after a county in Texas.

After the war, Doc opened his own practice, but eventually closed it. My mother told me he didn't like to ask people for payment. Then he worked for a Veterans psychiatric hospital. When I asked him what it was like there, he said, "The price is right." (Veterans received free care.) Doc taught us to be very cautious about the use of medicine and doctors.

My mother told Doc about pains in her arm and he advised her to see a cardiologist. She delayed the visit for years, waiting until she was eligible for Medicare.

When my father had chest pains, Doc came over, checked him out, and said he should go to the hospital. While he and his wife, Helen, were with us for

that serious visit, Helen said to my mother, “Do you know how much that rose bush I gave you is worth?”

Helen became Doc’s wife after my grandmother died. I can only guess why he waited. Helen wasn’t Jewish; maybe that was the reason.

After retirement from the VA hospital, Doc went to work for another physician. He soon left. He told my mother the physician wanted patients to make a return visit when it wasn’t necessary. Again he worked for a VA hospital, and told me he rode down the long halls on a golf cart.

When my family and I visited Pittsburgh from White Plains, we would see Doc and Helen. Once he asked Alex, my son, who was around 8, what the connection was with playing the piano and doing arithmetic. Alex said, “They’re both a system.” Alex and Doc both played the piano; Doc studied with the teacher in Pittsburgh who had also taught Oscar Levant.

In his 70s, Doc bumped his head against the inside roof of his car, and knew he was having a severe stroke. Soon after, his wife, Helen, and her daughter from a former marriage, Laine, moved themselves and Doc to Virginia, where Laine wanted to relocate. They placed Doc in a VA nursing home far out in Virginia. Was it necessary to place him in the home? Was it Laine pushing Helen to make the placement? Doc was taken away from Pittsburgh, where he had two sisters and friends.

He remained in that nursing home for 19 years; Helen said that one nurse took special interest in him. In the last years, Doc was blind.

My mother and aunt visited Doc at the nursing home and brought him candy. He threw the box back at them. I visited Doc, Helen, and Laine on a Christmas Day at their home, where they had brought him for a visit. He couldn’t talk; he walked with a three-pronged cane, but understood everything I said.

I went to his funeral at Arlington National Cemetery. Just I, Helen, Laine, and Helen’s friend attended. At the burial, we were seated on chairs, and a uniformed soldier knelt down in front of Helen, handed her the flag that had been on Doc’s coffin, and said, “The President thanks you for your service to the country.

Author Bio. Renee Marks Cohen is a writer/editor based in White Plains, New York. She has done lifestyle writing as well as medical editing and writing. In the latter niche, she has been the managing editor of New York Medical College's *New York Medical Quarterly*, and the author, for Janssen Japan, of over 35 interview articles on schizophrenia. She has edited books on neurology, taught Beijing Medical University scientists how to write, and audited clinical trial case report forms. Cohen is also a zumba and yoga enthusiast. You may contact her at: [RMC](#)