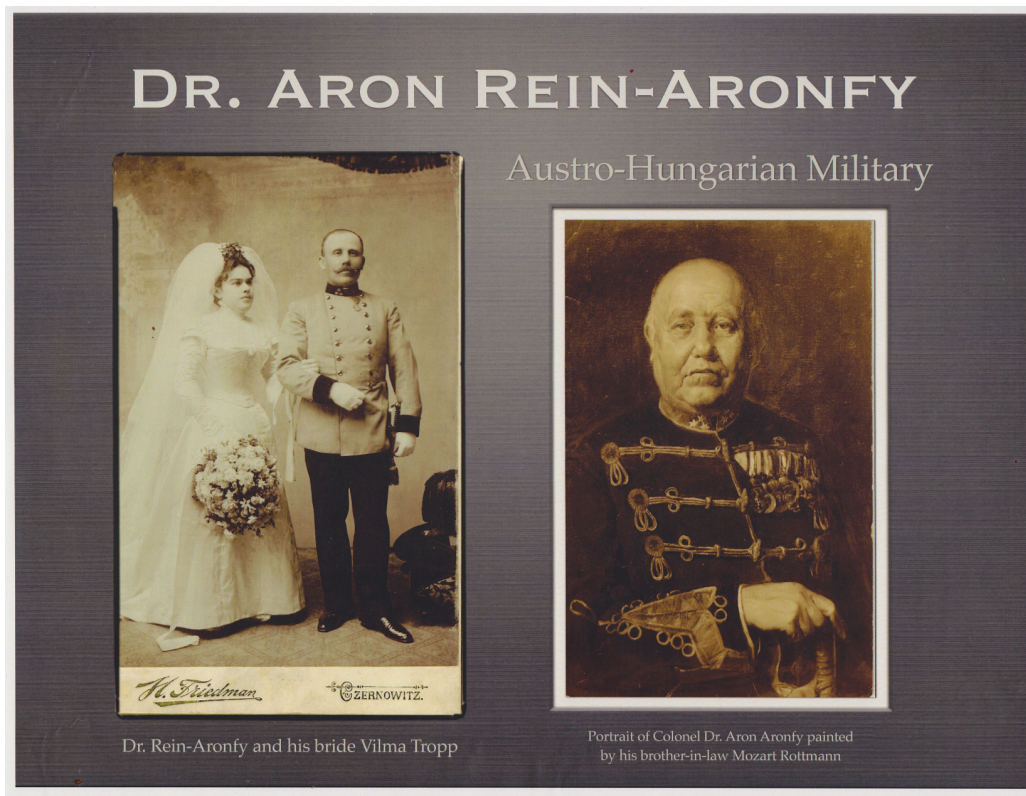


The Highly Decorated Dr. Aron Rein-Aronfy

by
Susanne Spira



My grandfather Aron Rein was born on 30 May 1868 in Magyar Gyerő Monostor, in the county of Klausenburg in what was then the Hungarian part of Transylvania. Today it is known as Manastireni, in the county of Cluj, in Romania. The family later moved south about 120 km and lived in Karlsburg (today, Alba Iulia, Romania), where his father, Isaac Rein, was the manager of the Jewish Hospital.

No doubt the family's involvement with the hospital influenced his choice of career. My grandfather entered the Austro Hungarian military service in February 1888, as a 10 year volunteer for the standing army followed by two years of the *Landwehr*, all to enable him to study medicine on an army state scholarship.

He began his studies at the Medical Faculty of the Budapest University, earning the title Doctor of Medicine in 1894. Concurrently he attended an officers' training course. His military evaluation papers indicate that he passed his exams with highest distinction. On

completion of these in 1894 he was assigned as a physician to serve in an infantry regiment with the rank of *Oberarzt* (Lieutenant). Intermittently he would also be assigned to different other regiments and hospitals in the region.

In the late 1890s he married Vilma Tropp, daughter of Rosa and Pinchas Shmuel Tropp from Suceava, Romania. The wedding photo (figure 1) shows him in uniform, now with the rank of Captain (Regiment Physician). With each new assignment his growing family moved with him. In 1900 while stationed in Bialystok, his first son, Istvan was born; in 1902 his second son Antal arrived; and in 1904, my mother Elisabeth, born in Ungvar, completed the family.

From 1903 to 1914 he was primarily the chief physician of the army hospital located in Ungvar (now Uzhhorod, Ukraine).

When WWI broke out in 1914, chief physician Dr. Rein spent all his time on the front. Again he headed different field hospitals, but left his family behind in Ungvar. Over the years he earned several decorations, among them the Gold Military Merit Medal with Crown (1909) and for controlling and bringing a typhus epidemic to a halt, he received the Franz Joseph Order Knight's Cross (1916). The latter, was apparently the highest honor that could be bestowed. During the war he was again promoted, this time to major as *Stabsarzt* (Staff Physician)

In January 1915, two years after undergoing mastectomy, Vilma, my 38-year old grandmother, tragically succumbed to breast cancer. She, and her father, Pinchas Shmuel Tropp, are both buried in the Ungvar Jewish cemetery.

After the war, my grandfather continued his army service in the restructured Hungarian Army, attaining the rank of colonel. As a high-ranking officer he was asked to magyarize his German name. He decided to change it to the redundant sounding patronymic, Aron Aronfy.

Grandfather was 50 years old when WWI ended. Throughout, he managed to remain a practicing orthodox Jew and became an ardent Zionist. After the end of the war he considered sending his oldest son Istvan to study at the Technion in Haifa.

As a child I knew my grandfather, the only grandparent I ever knew, as we visited Budapest repeatedly for the various Jewish holidays. We visited him the last time for a week on Passover before our family left for what was then Palestine in 1939. Ironically, I received the usual live Easter bunny, a present that was waiting for me, when we arrived.

Since his late 60s grandfather had difficulty walking to the synagogue. He became the principal donor supporting a small synagogue, built across the street from his home. It was destroyed in 1944 and renovated after the war when it was named *Beth Aharon* in his honor. It was still functioning in 1986 when I last visited Budapest. My brother-in-law reported sadly that it was abandoned and in ruins when he saw it in 2006.

I was amazed to learn from my long-time neighbor, the late Oscar Schoenfeld, that he remembered my grandfather! Oscar saw him dancing and leading the *Simchat Torah* procession in Ungvar. Grandfather must have cut an unforgettable colorful figure, dressed in his full military regalia -- uniform and multiple medals (figure 2).

My grandfather's high military honors and possibly his rank saved his life in the Holocaust. Unlike the German Nazis, the Hungarian Arrow Cross Fascists venerated their patriots and would not allow my grandfather to be deported. He, his two sisters and his brother-in-law, Mozart Rottmann, lived "protected" under house arrest in their villa in Budapest at 84 Thököly Ut (Street) throughout the German deportations.

Grandfather survived the war, but alas didn't live much longer afterward. On July 12, 1945, two months after VE Day (May 8, 1945), grandfather died at age 77. He is buried *ר"ה* (*morenu harav* = our teacher and rabbi) so I assume grandfather must have also been a yeshiva graduate.

Following Dr. Aron Rein-Aronfy's example, his only two grandchildren, I, as well as my only maternal cousin, Antal's son, Andras (Andrew) Aronfy became physicians. I think my grandfather would have been proud of the two of us: I, having completed not only my own military service as an officer in the Israeli Defense Forces, but also for having become a pathologist serving in another Jewish hospital (Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles, California). My late cousin Andrew also served in the US army and practiced pediatrics for many years in Maryland.