

Janos Mestitz



The man in this picture is my uncle, Janos Mestitz, one of my father's five brothers. I have no idea when the photo was taken, but I think he was approximately sixty at the time. My uncle was born in 1865. He attended the Ludovika Military School in Budapest. He was a jolly man. Later he was posted to Kassa [today Slovakia] as an officer and military commandant of the town. He was awarded the 'Dobrotiny' title of nobility later during a battle in World War I. When he got this title, Uncle Janos wanted it to apply to the whole family. This made my dad real upset because he couldn't see why we needed a noble title when everybody already knew and respected the Mestitzes. Anyway, we didn't need it, and that's where it ended. If we had had this title in 1940, we wouldn't have been deported, but how were we supposed to know that then? Uncle Janos' wife was called Ilona Kelen. I think she was Jewish, but I didn't know her because at that time I hadn't yet been to Budapest, where they lived. When Uncle Janos decided to retire as a colonel, he was told that if he converted to Christianity he would get the pension for the next rank up. He replied that if 53 battles and 12 high military decorations weren't enough, he wouldn't convert. And he was right.

I saw him only once, when I first went to Budapest. I think I was 16 and I went to Budapest by myself. I stayed at the Grimm Guesthouse. It was right beside the Vigado. My father told me that my uncle had no telephone so I should write him a postcard. On the second or third day of my stay the receptionist called and said that a young man was looking for me and I should go into the lounge. I did that and he turned out to be Uncle Janos. He had instructed them to say that it was a young man looking for me. He was a charming man. I had to dress up and go with him to the terrace of a coffeehouse on Erzsebet Square, where a group of retired officers used to meet. He took me there to introduce me to them, because they were his friends, and we stayed together until nightfall. I'm quite certain that none of them were Jewish. It happened the same year [in 1939] that Uncle Janos jumped off a tram while it was slowing down before a stop, fell down, broke his leg or something, got blood poisoning and died. He had two children: Ella and Viktor. Viktor was a handsome man, resembling my father. They lived in Budapest, hiding in a shelter during the war. When the war was over and they could come out onto the street, he left the shelter to freshen up, but he was shot near the Danube. His wife was Austrian - I don't think she was Jewish - and after her husband died, she returned to Vienna. I knew Ella, my uncle's daughter, very well. We visited them many times because during the Hungarian era I began visiting Budapest. She had two daughters. After my paternal grandmother was left a widow, she moved in with them.