

# NEIGHBOURS WHO DISAPPEARED

## Ostrava



We got involved in this project because people have been gradually forgetting how World War II changed people's lives, mostly Jewish. Many of them died and for those who were lucky and survived, nightmares will evoke memories of the horrors that were committed on them. Today's generation, without any knowledge what it is all about, only laughs at it. That is why we think that this project can help them to understand.

The Jews in the territory of Ostrava were not allowed to settle down till their emancipation in 1848. In 1848 there was only one Jew living in Moravian Ostrava. In the years of 1830-1880 there was a big economic boom in Ostrava. Employment opportunities attracted a lot of incomers from the environs and in the second half of the 19th century they were mostly Jews. In 1860 the Jewish Cult Society for Moravian and Polish Ostrava was founded within the framework of the religious community in Těšín. On 9 February 1875 the Jewish religious society in Ostrava approved its code of rules. In 1899 the first Jewish gymnastics club in Czech lands was founded there and called Bar Kochba, in 1924 renamed ZKS Makkabi. Jan Mayer was a member as well – in the photo of the Makkabi Games 1931.

Mr Mayer was born in a Jewish family in Ostrava in 1925. He was only 13 years old when the occupation began. He was in his third year when he had to leave his grammar school in 1939. He was made to wear a Jewish badge, which was not exactly a kind of fashion accessories. It was something like a ticket to hell.

Mr Mayer was deported with his family to Terezín in 1943. In 1944 he was taken to the unknown. That meant saying farewell to his mother and grandmother. After a long and exhausting journey by train he arrived, together with his father and brother, in a different dimension, a place which made the Terezín camp seem like a walk in paradise. They got to the extermination camp of Auschwitz ... And then he was standing bald-headed in front of doctor Mengele. The doctor was standing there like a policeman directing traffic but instead of cars he was directing human lives. How simple. Either to the left or to the right but there was more to it – those people did not have a clue what to the left and to the right meant and why their relatives were going to the opposite side. Mr Mayer and his brother were lucky; Mengele decided they would live. But their father did not have such luck and went to the opposite side, that meant to the gas chamber. When he wanted to say good-bye to his sons, Mengele slapped him on the face. That was the last moment Mr Mayer saw his father.

Then he and his brother went to Birkenau and from there they were sent to Glewitz. Then they went through another horror – it was called the death march. On 21 January 1945 they were liberated by the Red Army. They were transferred to Russia and from there expelled back to the west. They set off for Hungary on their own hook, suffered hunger but they found a box of artificial sweetener by chance. This they were exchanging for food. Then they got to Slovakia and together with a garrison they came back to Ostrava.

After his return home Mr Mayer had the chance to finish grammar school but he had to cope with completing everything within one year. Though he had gone through the cruelty of the war he had to commence his military service. In 1950 he got married and he managed to lead a normal life. His brother finished his medical studies and has been living in Germany since 1948.

Mr Mayer made an impression on us as a very strong and level-headed personality. In our opinion he had to have a lot of strength and fortitude to overcome his cruel fate. He himself says that he only had a lot of luck.



Jan Mayer at the Makkabi Games in Bahumin, 1931, the third one in the right row.



Mr Mayer and Mr Bachrach's cousin Zuzka were acting in J. Langer's theatrical play „A Canal through The Neudůlč Eau“



The smallest boy in Professor Zaiger's Jewish National School orchestra is Jan Mayer.



Jiří Palička, Vladimír Hula, Pavla Krejčí, Jan Beneš, Hana Kolářová and Libuše Chrásteczká



Mr Mayer with his wife

Hana Kolářová, Jan Beneš, Jiří Palička, Libuše Chrásteczká, Pavla Krejčí, Vladimír Hula

Grammar School in Ostrava-Hrabůvka, Františka Hajdy 34

