

In memoriam

In memoriam Prof Dr. Ernest Mayer



Academician Ernest Mayer was born in Zgornji Tuhinj near Kamnik (Slovenia) on November 10, 1920, into a family of teachers and died on March 17, 2009, in Ljubljana. From 1939 to 1942, he studied biology at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana. He then continued his studies in Vienna, until September 1944, when he returned home and joined the Partisans. He was demobilised in December 1945 and became a temporary assistant in the Botanical Institute of the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana. In the same year, he left again for Vienna, where he took his doctorate under the mentorship of Prof. Erwin Janchen, with a dissertation »Floristic articulation of the high mountain zone in the South-eastern Alps and its position in the Eastern Alps«. After returning home, he devoted himself to a university career, which took him from assistant to full professor at the Biotechnical Faculty in Ljubljana. He lectured in General and Systematic Botany. He was an excellent teacher and educator. After 32 years of teaching, at his own wish he left the university in 1978. He was employed in the same year at the Jovan Hadži Institute of Biology ZRC SAZU as a scientific adviser, right up until his retirement in 1991. He received numerous awards and recognitions for his work, including election as an extraordinary member (1974) and full member (1983) of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, a member of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts in Salzburg (1993), the award of the Boris Kidrič Fund (1975), the Kidrič Award for Lifetime Achievement (1986) and the Order of the Republic with silver wreath (1981) and many other distinctions.

His scientific work was primarily directed at the extensive morphological, taxonomic and phytogeographic questions of the flora of the central Balkan peninsular, with a particular stress on its polymorphism and endemism. He was critical in his research, which gave rise to numerous valuable results that were difficult to dispute. He undertook planned re-

search of all the important phytogeographic regions of the then Yugoslavia, alpine, Dinaric, steppe, Mediterranean or areas of psamophytic or ofiolithic flora.

Academician Mayer was the top expert in the flora and a leading researcher into plant taxonomy, floristics and phytogeography of Slovenia and the former Yugoslavia. This enabled him to write scientific papers in which he critically reviewed claims to date and supplemented them with his own findings, and he reinterpreted some taxa and reviewed and described various new findings. For the area of Slovenia and the central Balkan peninsula, either alone or with associates, he treated more than 50 taxa of various ranks. He cooperated with many domestic and foreign botanists, notably Academician S. Horvatić, Dr. J. Radić, Prof. Dr. LJ. Ilijanić and Prof. Dr. R. Domac from Croatia, Dr. Ž. Bjelčić from Bosnia, Academician V. Blečić, Dr. N. Diklić and Dr. V. Nikolić from Serbia and Academician K. Micevski from Macedonia.

Mayer's scientific oeuvre covers more than 100 units, among which the monograph «List of Ferns and Flowering Plants in Slovenia», which »Flora Europaea« counts among the 75 standard works on flora from individual parts of Europe, deserves special mention. Professor Mayer was mentor to 18 doctoral students and many master students and undergraduates at home and abroad.

Academician Mayer was one of the best specialist in botany. We will remember him with gratitude as a good colleague and sincere friend.

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I would like to write something of my memories of Professor Dr. Ernest Mayer, first as his student, then technical associate and later as his colleague at the Department of Biology of the University of Ljubljana.

The educational work of Prof. Dr. Ernest Mayer for many years played an important role in the education of botanists at the University of Ljubljana. Students listened to his lectures with great interest. In the early years, when there were no lecturers for individual fields of botany, he familiarised students not only with systematics, which was his research field, but also with the cytology, anatomy and morphology of plants. He did not then have modern aids at his disposal, such as a computer and a projector for showing illustrative material. However, with the coloured chalk with which he drew on a blackboard he conjured up the material with which he was dealing very clearly. Even today, I am of the opinion that such a method, whereby the professor creates a story and the content of the theme on a blackboard in front of you, sticks better in the memory than quickly presented pictures, sketches, formulae, metabolic pathways through a computer, such as we use today. He often held spring and autumn exams in the premises in the Botanical Gardens, where students could answer the questions set alongside living plant material.

When, after 1960, it was possible to employ a number of assistants, Prof. Mayer directed each of them to a specific field of botany, thus performing a great service. In addition to an assistant for systematics, he directed one into cytology, another into physiology and later yet another into ecology. After having completed their doctorates and post-doctoral degrees, they each took over their own field of botany, including both research and pedagogic work.



Prof. Dr. Ernest Mayer and Dr. Nada Gogala during fieldwork in 1959

As a demonstrator and later for two years a technical associate, during my time of study I took part in major expeditions with the professor throughout all the republics of former Yugoslavia. Because he had contact with all the current botanists in this region, he often organised these excursions with them and their assistants and also took biology students with him. A journey through the Adriatic islands that Prof. Mayer organised in 1960 together with Prof. Radovan Domac from Zagreb, was unforgettable for me. We became familiar with endemic flora on the islands of Vis, Biševo, Svetac, Jabuka and Palagruža. The outer islands, such as Jabuka and Palagruža, were visited by very few biologists, let alone tourists, especially in the sixties. Profesor Mayer was a great connoisseur of the flora in the wider region of the central Balkans. Our excursions took us to Velebit, Biokovo and Šar Planina, to enumerate only those that remained among our the finest memories. When I became assistant for plant physiology, I no longer took part in excursions with Prof. Mayer. After 1978, when the professor became a member of the Jovan Hadži Institute ZRC SAZU and left the Department of Biology of the University of Ljubljana, his lectures were taken over by his associates.

I would like to mention at the end his great service in mentoring doctoral, master and graduation theses. Candidates came from the University of Ljubljana as well as other republics of former Yugoslavia. He thus left an indelible trace as an educator in botanical research and educational activities, among both those who are sadly no longer with us and those of us who still think of him and his work.

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