

Arthur Mayer

Born 1884. Chef.

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This life story was archived in 2021, with kind permission, from the website of Richard Hughes at www.richardhughestherapy.com. The article was written by Richard Hughes who is a psychotherapist living and practising in Walthamstow.

1. Early Life



The sepia photograph is of a young man in his early twenties. He stares out with youthful confidence; the white carnation he wears on his lapel denotes 'purity and luck' which was a popular motif in the early 1900s for a young person embarking on the next chapter of their life.

His name is Arthur H. C. Mayer and he was born in Walthamstow on the 16th July 1884. That much I knew but who was he and what became of him? His story called out to be told; it was as though he wanted to be remembered.

Arthur was the third of five children born to Erhardt Mayer, a Swiss baker and confectioner who had emigrated to England for work and his English wife Annie, who was a 'housewife'.

He had four siblings: Alice who was born in 1881, Erhardt Jnr in 1882, Oscar in 1887 and William in 1888. Arthur was baptised, Arthur Henry Grisogon Mayer and the curious choice of Crisogon may hint at Ottoman ancestry as it was a popular Hellenic name in the late 19th Century.

The world Arthur came into was rapidly changing. The cornerstone to the Statue of Liberty had just been laid; nationalism, colonialism and Marxism defined an increasingly hostile political landscape, it was the beginning of the electric age.

In 1887, when Arthur was 3-years-old, England experienced the hottest summer on record. The slum areas of London were filthy and rat-infested and the unemployed camped out in the parks and gardens of the West End. In 1888, the Whitechapel Murders dominated The Illustrated Police News, and in 1889, Princess Alexandra visited Joseph Merrick 'the Elephant Man' in his rooms at the London Hospital.

2. Walthamstow



Meanwhile, the Mayer family had settled in Walthamstow in Essex, a parish noted for its woodland and fresh air, 6.5 miles north east of the city of London. Whilst the tree-lined high street, known as Marsh Street back then, looked like a prosperous county town with its old Georgian mansions, change was afoot there too.

The railway had arrived in 1872 transforming the area, making it popular with the industrious working and middle classes. Freehold land societies and property speculators moved in, carving up the orchards and grounds of the grand houses, selling them off plot by plot to build rows of utilitarian terraces. With so much construction going on, Walthamstow must have seemed like an exciting place for a young boy like Arthur.

The Mayers moved to Ickworth Park Road, a brand new terrace of yellow stock brick, with mains running water; an important consideration at a time when typhoid was rife. Today, the street is lined with mature trees and the random vernacular gives it an almost villagey feel. The Mayers' home had three bedrooms and upstairs the four boys shared the largest front room, whilst their parents slept at the back and their sister had the small box room. Downstairs there was a front parlour with a splendid tiled fireplace and an Arts and Crafts overmantle mirror. At the back of the house was a scullery with a cast iron range, where Arthur's father taught him to how to bake breads and pastries, the kind of continental specialities Erhardt Snr prepared everyday at the Great Midland Hotel, which today is known as the St Pancras Hotel. Outside would have been a flushing privy and a good sized garden for growing cut flowers and vegetables.



Arthur Mayer's home, 18 Ickworth Park Road, Walthamstow, in 2021.

The Mayers were a mixed race family which was not uncommon in 19th Century London. Victorian England had an open door policy towards immigration until 1905 with the majority of arrivals being Catholics or Jews escaping poverty and pogroms.

The Mayers' situation was slightly different in that they were Protestant; Erhardt senior was Swiss born, but the family's ancestry was undoubtedly Orthodox and Eastern Mediterranean. A striking looking family, this can be seen from Arthur's photograph and that of his brother Erhardt on his wedding day (below), the four dark-haired brothers must have made quite an impact on the neighbourhood.

Arthur's childhood friends included his neighbours' William, Horace and Arthur Stevens who by 1901 were apprentice chair makers and carvers. He also knew Edith Rivett, who lived in the house on the corner. As an adult she would go on to become the secretary of the Ancient Order of Foresters Friendly Society and a part-time ambulance driver.



Arthur's brother Erhardt on his wedding day.

3. Belfast

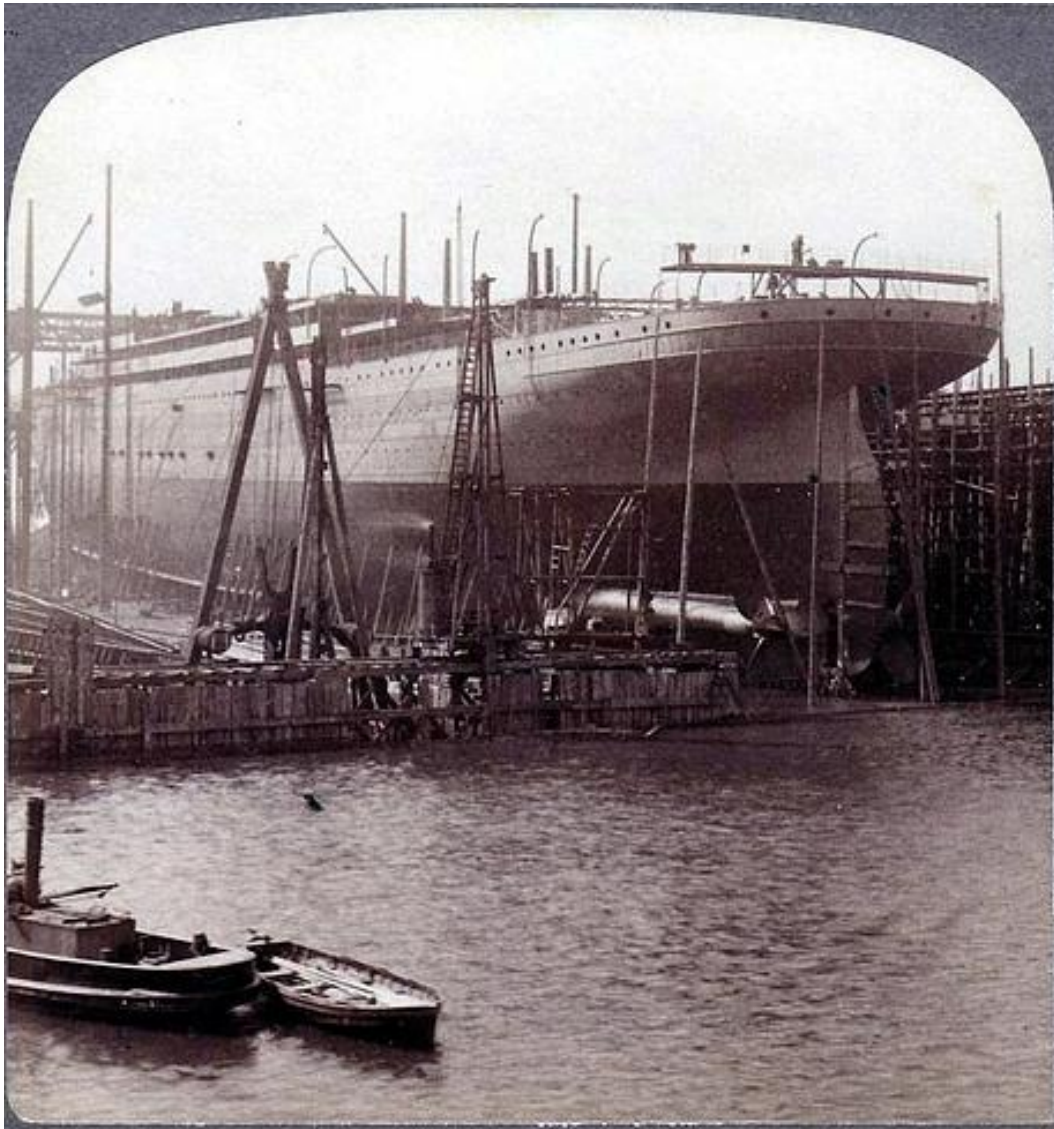


The Grand Central Hotel in Belfast, the city's most luxurious hotel.

At the time of the 1901 census, Arthur was 17-years-old but he wasn't at home when the census took place. One explanation may have been that he was at work. Around this date, he had decided to follow in his father's footsteps and become a chef. The boy clearly had a talent and a few years later he was offered a position in Belfast at the newly opened Grand Central Hotel, on the Royal Avenue. With its 200 bedrooms each boasting 'fresh laundered Irish linen', a 'Louis XV' style dining room and an elegant palm court, this was the city's most luxurious hotel; it would have been highly prestigious appointment. How proud his family must have been and anxious too, as this was the first time Arthur had lived away from home.

As a chef at the Grand Central Hotel, Arthur would have had responsibility for creating fancy French dishes such as Consommé Petite Marmite, Filet de Mouton a la Sargent and Glace Pralinée. Room and board was part of

his employment contract and he found himself living with other male colleagues in a garret, high above the elegant salons and dining rooms. At times, he must have felt homesick for Walthamstow and his family but Belfast was an exciting and vibrant city.



RMS Adriatic under being built at the Harland and Wolff shipyard in Belfast, where the RMS Titanic was also built.

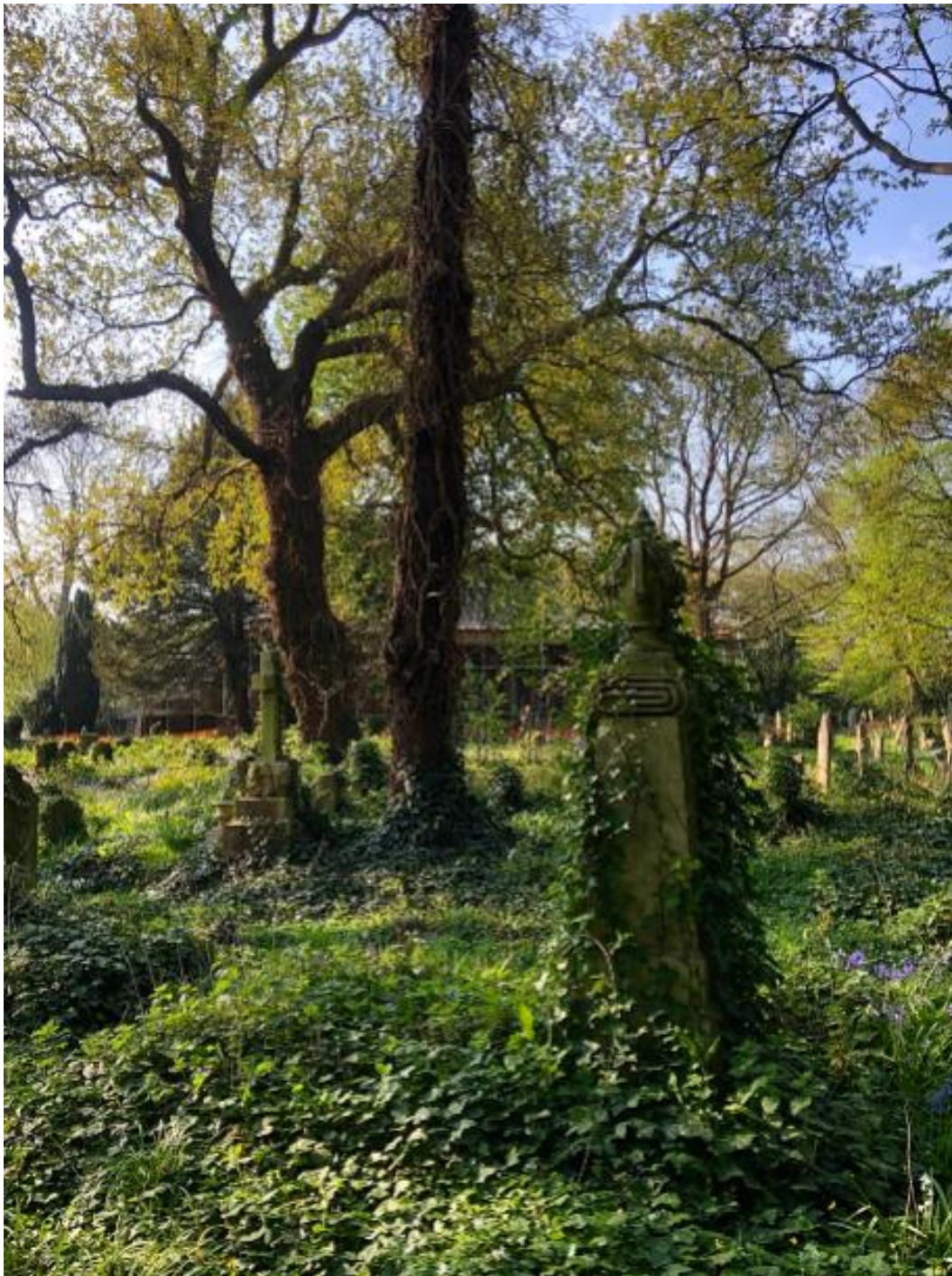
Grand civic buildings were being thrown up almost overnight, the shipyards were in competition to build bigger and better record-breaking Atlantic-crossing liners and cheap labour made it all possible, the place was booming and Arthur was living and working right in the middle of it. There was also mass emigration, sprawling slums, vice and industrial unrest. The city was racked by sectarian tensions which spilled out into riots and the dock strike of 1907.

Up until then, Arthur had never seen anything like the Harland and Wolff shipyard, which at the time was constructing the RMS Adriatic. Perhaps this fired his imagination; did he dream of becoming a chef on a liner or

one day using the city as a stepping stone to America? In just a few years time, construction on the Titanic would start in the same shipyard. Or perhaps his plans would have brought him back to London to work somewhere like the Ritz which had opened on Piccadilly in 1906. Being a chef the world was his oyster.

And what about pleasure? Here was a young man with excellent job prospects, plenty of spare time and money in his pocket. His good looks and confident gaze would have surely caught someone's attention and we can only hope that he experienced the thrill of chance encounters, courting and 'walking out'.

4. Illness and Death at the age of 23



Arthur was buried in a woodland glade, in the cemetery of St Peter's in the Forest in Epping Forest. His gravestone is made of red granite and uniquely for the cemetery, his enamelled photographic portrait adorns the memorial.

But something was not quite right. Around the middle of 1907 Arthur had begun to feel unwell, perhaps it was the 'summer flu', the symptoms were similar with fever and aching joints but the strange bruising on his legs and arms was more worrying. Whilst too unwell to work, he continued to reside at the hotel.

When the bleeding started, a decision was made to involve a doctor, who diagnosed purpura haemorrhagica which may have indicated an underlying medical condition such as Leukemia. In the early 20th Century, Leukemia was commonly treated with arsenic; quinine was used for the fever, opium for diarrhoea and pain, iron for anemia and iodine as an antibacterial agent.

Arthur's family must have felt helpless with him so far away. At first, they encouraged him to come back to London, but as that became less of a possibility, they considered travelling out to Belfast to be with him. The journey would have taken two days by train and Arthur's father and brother would have needed to take time off work without pay, since back in 1900 compassionate leave did not exist.

With the assistance of a Christian charity, Arthur was moved to a hospital. At that time, Belfast had two state of the art hospitals which were beginning to use X-rays and radiotherapy to treat cancers. However Arthur's condition deteriorated quickly and little could be done beyond pain relief. On the 12th January 1908 Arthur died, he was 23-years-old.

His devastated father made the decision to bring his body back to England, a costly process but one the family was unequivocal about. We can only imagine the impact of his death, the grief they felt for their beloved son and brother.

Arthur was buried in a woodland glade, in the cemetery of St Peter's in the Forest in Epping Forest. His gravestone is made of red granite and uniquely for the cemetery, his enamelled photographic portrait adorns the memorial. It has been there amongst the wild flower and ivy for more than a 100 years.

Sadly, there were further tragedies to befall the Mayer family; whilst both of Arthur's brothers Erhardt and Oscar survived the Great War, in 1921, Arthur's father and his 12-year-old niece, the daughter of his sister Alice, died within months of each other from diphtheria. Erhardt senior was buried in the same grave as his son, testament to the strong bond they shared.

And in 1941, Arthur's older brother Erhardt was killed in a German bombing raid on King's Cross station.

The beloved son was never forgotten. Arthur's brother Oscar named his own son Arthur, in tribute to his older brother; this nephew lived until 2005, had his own family and died aged 93.



St Peter-in-the-Forest is a Church of England church in Walthamstow, East London, sited in a small portion of Epping Forest. The building was founded in 1840 as a chapel of ease to St Mary's Church, Walthamstow, and designed by the architect John Shaw Jr. It became a parish of its own in 1844, was assigned a cemetery in 1845, and extended in 1887. Though damaged by bombing in World War II, and fire damaged in the 1970s, it was Grade II listed in 2009. It is currently on the Heritage at Risk Register.
