In memory of

Pavel Beco

a pioneer for the conservation of agrobiodiversity

Pavel was a man with so many different interests and activities that an obituary of him and his commitments would fill pages. However, there is one commitment that made him well known across all national borders and this will be honoured below: His commitment to the conservation of agrobiodiversity in Switzerland and throughout Europe.

Pavel came from a family of physicians who fled Prague in 1968 as a result of the Russian occupation of what was then Czechoslovakia and came to Switzerland. He developed into a „nature boy" with the Scouts - where he was also involved throughout his life. He studied biology and then became a primary school teacher. His work at the highest located school in the canton of Zurich in Hörnlibergland brought him closer to mountain farming, to which he felt committed from then on. I came into contact with him back then when he asked me, as the then „head" of the newly established ProSpecieRara Foundation, which old livestock breeds and cultivated plant varieties I could recommend to him for a mountain farm. We stayed in contact. Right from the start, he seemed „promising" for the projects we had just started.

When he was offered a mountain farm in the Neckertal valley in Toggenburg, he seized the opportunity and expanded the farm, the residential building for a large family and the farmstead to accommodate endangered breeds and varieties. At that time (1984), we were looking for emergency space for "Stiefelgeissen" (booted goats) when we had to take over the last herd within 72 hours and move them across Lake Walen due to the shepherdess's accident. Pavel offered space. Incidentally, this event later led to the Europe-wide project to set up „Rescue Stations" that can accommodate livestock in case of emergency, which was subsidised by the EU Commission. Other endangered breeds, Bündner Oberländer sheep, Mangalica, chickens and geese soon followed on Pavel's farm Albisbodenhof, sugar root, old potato varieties and much more grew in the vegetable garden and Pavel continually contributed old fruit varieties. Pavel's farm soon became the figurehead of ProSpecieRara. We kept sending interested journalists to visit him. As a result, Pavel was soon overrun and his farm became a „show farm". Pavel's unique ability to cater for the exact level and field of knowledge of his audience during the guided tours further increased the influx of interested visitors. He was able to inspire school classes as a teacher and even agricultural teachers as a scientist. As a result, before his visit to Switzerland, the then Deputy Minister of Agriculture Bartak from the Czech Republic made an express request to the Swiss authorities to be allowed to visit Pavel's farm.

Visit by the then Czech Deputy Minister of Agriculture Bartak to Pavel's farm

At the time, Pavel had a dedicated trainee, Sigrid Kownatzki. Together they developed a concept for setting up so-called ark farms, one step simpler than the domestic animal parks of the time. Sigrid then implemented the concept at GEH in Germany. It was so convincing that other countries followed suit.

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the entire Iron Curtain was torn down, Pavel returned to Prague for the first time. He was thrilled and said I had to come with him next time. I agreed and said that we should also take this opportunity to visit people who had heard about ProSpecieRara, get in touch with us and tell us about their own efforts to preserve rare breeds in their respective places. So after an extensive visit to Prague,

Pavel with woolly pigs

we first went on a tour of Bohemia and Moravia. We were amazed to find enthusiasts there who, completely on their own, went to incredible lengths (often even against the former state functionaries) and really achieved a lot. However, although they knew us from newspaper articles in Switzerland, they were not networked within their country. We spontaneously decided to set up a coordination office in Prague, which we called „Eko-Team Praha". Pavel took on the organisation and interpreting, I took on the „financing". There wasn't much to finance, as the heating costs at the time exceeded the employees' salaries because the state was still bearing the social security costs. The Eko team's work performance was rather modest, which is why we took the project coordination back to Switzerland after two years. But the mere fact that we took this step made us known throughout the former Eastern Bloc (even an expensive TV advert would not have done us so much good!). We received letters to Prague and St. Gallen from all the former Eastern states, which Pavel and I then travelled to, for 2-3 weeks every year, sometimes here, sometimes there. Pavel and I became close friends.

Pavel at the inauguration of the wild fruit collection in Mogelsberg, Switzerland

After studying the former diversity (with documents from the library of the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna), Pavel and I then visited those areas where we hoped to find remnants of the former agrobiodiversity. These were mostly remote (mountain) areas that had escaped nationalisation or regions with traditional minorities. Pavel was the interpreter and interested in plants, I was interested in old breeds of domestic animals. That's how Pavel came to collect fruit and wild fruit varieties and together we found many old breeds of domestic animals in the most remote valleys of the Beskids and the Carpathians.

This commitment led to the founding of the „Monitoring Institute for Rare Breeds and Seeds in Europe" in 1995, whose task was to show what existed in the past, whether it still existed and whether there was a need for action to conserve it. We called this „Mapping - Watching - Alarming". If a conservation project still appeared to make sense, the European SAVE Foundation, which we had co-founded in the meantime, took over and the Monitoring Institute was later incorporated into it. Pavel's outstanding work included the creation of a multilingual online synonym register of European fruit and wild fruit varieties, which he developed with Vaclav Tetera in Moravia and with experts from other countries. In the Neckertal valley in Toggenburg, Pavel set up a tree nursery for old fruit varieties that were particularly suitable for higher mountain locations. Interested parties from all over Switzerland (and neighbouring regions) made a pilgrimage to Pavel, sought advice and bought their supplies from him. He also set up publicly accessible fruit variety gardens in several places. However, wild fruit collections were particularly close to his heart. He set up several such collections with the SAVE Foundation project office in Eastern Switzerland. In north-eastern Slovenia, he finally built up a comprehensive wild fruit collection in which he wanted to show accessions from the Atlantic to Siberia. Unfortunately, he was unable to complete this project, which was particularly close to his heart.

With Pavel's passing, an immense amount of lexical knowledge and expertise was laid to rest. Fortunately, however, he had made and left records of most of it. We all owe Pavel a great deal. We will always honour his memory. Rest in peace!

Hape Grünenfelder