

*The film adaptation of Ota Pavel's
"The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks"
directed by Karel Kachyňa*

*Ekranizacja „Śmierci pięknych saren”
Oty Pavla w reżyserii Karela Kachyňy*

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Słowa kluczowe

literatura czeska XX wieku, proza autobiograficzna, Ota Pavel, adaptacja filmowa, historia Czech

Abstract

The aim of this article is to show the occupation of Czechoslovakia during the Second World War through the eyes of writer Ota Pavel in *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks*. It includes a comparative analysis of the literary work with the film adaptation directed by Karel Kachyňa. My goal is to present the fate of the Jewish community from which the author came. This paper is an attempt at a cultural and historical approach to Czech literature and its adaptation, i.e. describing, comparing and interpreting the specific features of these works, which are different from the cultural heritage of other Central European countries during the 20th century.

Abstrakt

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest ukazanie okupacji Czechosłowacji w czasie II Wojny Światowej oczami pisarza Oty Pavla w *Śmierci pięknych saren*. W ra-

mach realizacji artykułu przeprowadzona zostanie analiza porównawcza materiału literackiego z ekranizacją utworu w reżyserii Karela Kachyňy. Moim zamysłem jest próba przedstawienia losów społeczności żydowskiej z której wywodził się twórca. Intencją pracy jest próba kulturoznawczego oraz historycznego ujęcia literatury czeskiej i jej adaptacji, to znaczy opisanie, porównanie i zinterpretowanie specyficznych cech tej twórczości, odmiennej od kulturowego dorobku innych krajów środkowoeuropejskich XX wieku.

**The film adaptation of Ota Pavel's
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Autobiographical prose, about the fate of the Jewish community, has been the motif of many literary works. It had a special role in the European literature of the 20th century. It played a special role in the works of Czech and Slovak writers such as Arnošt Lustig (*There will be no humiliation* of 1962), Ladislav Grosman (*Shop on the main street* of 1964) and Ota Pavel (*The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks* of 1971). The inhumane time of the Second World War left a mark on the works of the authors mentioned above.

Pavel's work is a particularly interesting example of ergocentric prose. In the title story, he presents the tragic fate of his family. In his memoirs, he returns to childhood during the cruel time of the Second World War. He emphasizes his incredible fascination with his father. *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks* is inextricably associated with the author's biography. For a Czech prose writer, the story has become a form of therapy – a settlement with an idealized past. "He later said that thanks to writing he again became a boy, safe by his father's side"¹.

For a writer born on the Vltava River, the lyricism of prose was a characteristic feature of Pavel's artistic activity. This resulted from a longing for childhood, with a sense of strong family ties and a constant search for harmony. In literature, the combination of tragedy and comedy was of particular interest to this prose writer. Examples include *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks* (*Smrt krásných srnců*), *When I met the fish* (*Jak jsem potkal ryby*) and *The Run through Prague* (*Běh Prahou*). Aleksander Kaczorowski writes about the title song: "If we had to draw up a ranking of the most beautiful Czech books, *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks* would certainly have been at the forefront"².

Ota Pavel was born in 1930 in Prague, a city with which he was associated for almost all of his life. His family had Jewish roots, and the writer's real name was Popper. Undoubtedly, his father, Leon Popper was an interesting figure from the circle of the author's relatives. He had been a soldier during the First World War, which had a significant impact on his fate. After the war, he stayed abroad earning a living in Morocco, Spain and Turkey. Then he returned to Czechoslovakia, where he married a Czech woman from a poor family, who gave birth to three sons (Ota was the youngest). Leon Popper

¹ M. Szczygieł, *Láska nebeská*, Warszawa 2012, p. 32, my translation.

² A. Kaczorowski, *Ota Pavel. Pod powierzchnią*, Wołowiec 2018, p. 13, my translation.

became a sales agent and sold Electrolux vacuum cleaners. He was successful as a salesman, which allowed him and his family to live prosperously. Problems arose in 1939, however, when the army of the Third Reich occupied Czechoslovakia. The state became the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, where racial laws were adopted that aimed at, individuals of Jewish origin. Orders required, among other things, to send children from mixed marriages to concentration camps. Pavel's two older brothers and his father were sent to the "death factory" in Mauthausen. All three survived the war despite unimaginably difficult conditions.

The time of the Second World War left indelible experiences in the author's psyche. For him, it was a period of constant fear for the fate of his family. One of the forms of reacting to the negative experiences was sport. After the tragic events related to the war, he was initially employed as a sports journalist for Prague radio: then he worked for a sports newspaper. Pavel "published a collection of articles on sports issues *The Dukla team between skyscrapers (Dukla mezi mrakodrapy)*, *The box full of champagne (Plná bedna šampaňského)*, *The cup from God (Pohár od Pánaboha)*, *The son of the cellar king (Syn celerového krále)*, in which he emphasized the psychological and moral values of sports competition." – as Zofia Tarajło-Lipowska wrote³.

As a sports commentator, Pavel felt fulfilled. He reported on events related to the world of sport and often travelled abroad. He accompanied Prague's football teams, e. g. Dukla Praga during their preparations for the football season. During the winter Olympic Games in Innsbruck, he worked as a correspondent for Czechoslovakia. He had an attack of a mental breakdown while in Austria. He described the tragic event in an epilogue of the story *When I met the fish*

I lost my mind at the winter Olympics in Innsbruck. My brain became eclipsed, as the fog came down from the Alps. I saw one gentleman as the devil in all its glory, he had horns, hooves, hair and age-old decayed teeth. Then I went to the mountains above Innsbruck to set the countryside on fire. I was convinced that such a great brightness would disperse the fog. I had already taken cows and stallions out of the stable so that they wouldn't burn down when I was caught by the Austrian police. They put handcuffs on me and led me into the valley. I called them, took off my shoes, and walked barefoot in the snow like Christ, whom they lead to the crucifixion. I was sent by Dworzyszczce to doctors in Prague⁴.

³ Z. Tarajło-Lipowska, *Historia literatury czeskiej. Zarys*, Wrocław 2010, p. 369, my translation.

⁴ O. Pavel, *Jak spotkałem się z rybami*, translated by J. Waczków, [in:] idem, *Śmierć pięknych saren*, translated by A. Czcibor-Piotrowski, Warszawa 2011, p. 196, my translation.

The incident that happened to the writer in Innsbruck changed his life. Causes for his mental breakdown were sought. The emergence of his strange behavior could have been dramatic memories from the war period recalled by the shouts of supporters in German. The hypothesis of a negative perception of German speech by the writer seems plausible, but it is not possible to clearly identify the reason for his illness.

Pavel spent the following years in psychiatric hospitals, where he underwent pharmacological treatment. His isolation from society caused him to fall into states of depression. For him, writing became a form of therapy, thanks to which he could feel fulfilled. In his work he returned to his childhood, describing moments spent with his family. The writer was particularly fond of expeditions with his father to the river, where they fished together. Years later he remembered it this way:

Finally, I came to the right word: freedom. Fishing is above all freedom. Walking for miles behind trout, drinking water from springs, being alone and free for at least an hour, a day or even weeks and months. Free from television, newspapers, radio and civilization⁵.

The result of Pavel's literary work was the creation of two volumes of stories *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks* and *When I met the fish*. Both prose works guaranteed him a place in the history of Czech literature. I cannot ignore the fact that they were related to his illness. Teresa Zofia Orłoś considers the volumes written at that time to be autobiographical stories. According to the researcher, "During during his illness, he wrote two volumes of autobiographical stories, *Smrt krásných srnců* (1971) and published posthumously *Jak jsem potkal ryby* (1974) is the peak achievement of his work, also in terms of form"⁶.

As I mentioned earlier, in these stories he mainly presented life from his childhood. They are accompanied by the character of a narrator, incarnated by the author himself. A characteristic feature of Pavel's writing was the role of the main character, his unique father. He spoke about him with respect, emphasizing the strong bond that connected them. Most often he described him as "daddy", showing his strong feelings of love and attachment to his parent.

Pavel presented the fate of his family against the background of Czechoslovakia's history. The writer's childhood coincided with the Nazi occupation of the country. He emphasized the problems that his Jewish family with had to face. The aim was to humiliate and marginalize Jews. Life was filled

⁵ Ibidem, p. 198.

⁶ T. Z. Orłoś, *Studia bohemistyczne. Część II*, Kraków 1992, p. 130, my translation.

with the ever-present anxiety and fear for the lives of relatives and horror of the Holocaust. He presented the reality of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, when Nazis took over Jewish property. The Jews were forced to leave their homes. It was common practice – as everywhere in the occupied lands – to stigmatize people through the obligation to wear the Star of David. The danger of deportation to concentration camps aroused horror among the Jewish community.

The author, both in *the Death of the Beautiful Roebucks* and *When I met the fish*, devoted a lot of space to extraordinary descriptions of nature. Phenomenal nature provides a contrast to the dark times of war remembered through the eyes of a child. He wrote that

On the tufts on the river a slope was rising, and it was an unusual slope: not a single stone, as many as there are on such a slope, but on the glades between mighty oaks a juicy soft turf was growing; here the game was coming to feed, and then it ran to the water. Actually, it was a beautiful garden or a castle park, but in fact, it was a garden of death, where the inscription could be placed: “The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks”⁷.

The main character of Pavel’s stories was his father. He depicted the adventures of his parents’ live, interwoven with both comedy and tragedy. On the one hand, he depicted his father as a somewhat crazy man, a social buffoon, who thanks to his specific approach to life, was able to achieve professional success. He ideally played the role of a charismatic salesman praising the effectiveness of vacuum cleaners.

As we read from Pavel’s small autobiographical notes, his father, despite the terrible situation in which he was, managed to pass on the most important values to his sons. Joanna Wojnicka writes that

The most important figure in the literary world of Ota Pavel is Daddy – a figure made of blood and bones, and at the same time a mythical one: the hero of children’s dreams. His father’s adventures, work, crazy ideas, successes and failures are described by Pavel in a simple, humorous and sometimes somewhat ironic way – this is where the distance of an adult, who sees things that the child does not understand, is revealed. From these descriptions emerges the image of a family living first on the eve of an impending catastrophe, and then amidst its consequences⁸.

⁷ O. Pavel, *Śmierć pięknych saren...*, p. 39.

⁸ J. Wojnicka, *Epitafium dla taty, czyli Śmierć pięknych saren Oty Pavla i Karela Kachyni*, [in:] *Hrabal i Inni. Adaptacje czeskiej literatury*, ed. E. Ciszewska, E. Nurczyńska-Fidelska, Łódź 2013, p. 115, my translation.

Pavel died in 1973 as a result of unexpected heart attack, but the writer's work was appreciated in Czechoslovakia after his death. The author's artistic output was of interest to filmmakers who wanted to present his stories on the screen. The first director to use Pavel's prose was Karel Smyczek. A graduate of the Prague FAMU school made a short drama based on one of the stories from *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks – Carp for the Wehrmacht (Kapri pro Wehrmacht)* which was released in 1975.

Karel Kachyňa was another filmmaker interested in the writer's prose. The director was recognized among the best filmmakers of the Czechoslovak New Wave. One of the first graduates of FAMU, he had made well-known films such as *Coach to Vienna* (1966) and *The Ear* (1969). The first one was considered controversial in the Czechoslovakian context. It showed the fate of a woman who lost her husband during the Second World War. The heroine wanted to avenge the death of her beloved, but her hatred of the occupying troops in Czechoslovakia was disturbed by the unexpected feelings she had for an Austrian soldier. Peter Hames wrote that "The importance of the film was determined by the fact that it did not show partisans in a heroic convention. A similar "sin" was also the case of the movie very different from *Closely Observed Trains*, which were shot the same year, however, in the *Coach to Vienna*, the partisans not only murdered the heroine, who is a German (or rather Austrian), but also raped her"⁹.

Coach to Vienna describes the political situation in Czechoslovakia at the end of the 1960s. The screenplay was written by the Czech filmmaker Jan Procházka. It was full of the personal experiences of the writer, who strongly opposed the communist authorities. He became a public enemy, the centre of a political scandal. The security service constantly monitored Procházka, eavesdropping and recording his private conversations, which were later broadcast on state television. *The Ear* was a fictionalized story about fear, regime power and surveillance. It was not allowed to be distributed by then political system at the time. The premiere of this film took place not earlier than in 1989. Hames claimed that "Throughout the film there is the fear of the ubiquitous secret police. Halfway through the film power returns, and people lurk in the garden disappear, just so that the security can reappear under another pretext"¹⁰.

Kachyňa's first meeting with Ota Pavel's prose resulted in the creation of a television series. In 1979 the director made *Golden Eels (Zlatí úhoři)* for Czechoslovakian television. The plot of this film was based on fragments of

⁹ P. Hames, *Czechosłowacka Nowa Fala*, translated by J. Burzyńska et al., Gdańsk 2009, p. 97, my translation.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 103.

the story *When I met the fish*. The production of the Czechoslovakian television belonged to the genre of poetic drama. The script was written by Kachyňa in collaboration with Dušan Hamšík. This film was shot in colour. Popular Czech and Slovak actors such as Rudolf Hrušínský, Vladimír Menšík and Radoslav Brzobohaty were hired to make the film. The production was favoured by critics, as evidenced by its victory in the Prix Italia in 1979. In Czechoslovakia, the *Golden Eels* were clearly losing popularity with the television series *Arabela*, which had been broadcast since the end of the 1970s.

For Karel Kachyňa, the TV series was an introduction to Pavel's work. This time the director decided to present the writer's prose on the big screen. He created a full-length cinema production. In 1986, he presented *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks* in a film version. Kachyňa's film was perfect in form and extremely moving in content. The director based the plot on four stories from the collection of *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks*. Apart from the title track, the other three were: *The Dearest in Central Europe*, *In the Service of Sweden* and *Carp for the Wehrmacht*. Thus, Kachyňa selected the stories entering the film by dividing *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks* in half (the whole collection consisted of eight novellas). The screenplay of this film was written jointly by Kachyňa and Hamšík, just like in *Golden Eels*. Vladimír Smutný was responsible for cinematography. The production of *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks* was carried out by Barrandow Film Studio, one of the largest and most modern film studios in Central Europe in the 1960s. The film was shot in colour.

The main role of Leo Popper was entrusted to Karel Heřmánek, an actor who graduated from the Leoš Janáček Academy of Performing Arts in Brno in 1972, who managed to perform a characteristic role. The contemporary Czech audience knows him for his participation in films such as *Revival*, directed by Alice Neliis; *Wrong Side Up*, directed by Petr Zelenka; or *Kola*, directed by Jan Svěrák. Actress Marta Vančurová, a graduate of the Theatre Department of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, played the role of Leo Popper's wife, Herma. She was not an anonymous figure among Czech and Slovak actors, as she received an award at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in 1974. She was honoured for her role in *Lovers in the Year One*. However, her performance of Theresia in František Vlácil's – *Shadows of a Hot Summer* in 1977 brought her the greatest popularity. Rudolf Hrušínský was undoubtedly the most recognizable actor involved in the work on *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks*. His cult role of Josef Švejk in Karel Steklý's film *Dobryj voják Švejk* also brought him great popularity outside Czechoslovakia. He also appeared in other film adaptations of Czech prose, including Vladislav Vančura's *Capricious Summer* based on a novel by Jiří Menzel,

The Cremator, written by Ladislav Fuks and directed by Juraj Herz; and *Cutting It Short*, written by Bohumil Hrabal and screened by Menzel. In each of these films, he was able to create unforgettable characters in an unusual way. Hrušínský played the role of Karel Prošek, Leo Popper's best friend, in *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks*.

The film adaptation of Pavel's prose was characterized by screenshots of unusual landscapes. The writer devoted a lot of space to descriptions of nature, which is why the director decided to develop an area for nature in the film. The cinematography for which Smutný was responsible, was worthy of appreciation. The open-air films were shot in small, picturesque villages, e.g. in Týřovice on the Berounka River, Křivoklát and Karlovy Vary. In addition, the urban landscape of Prague was used for the making of this film.

The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks started very positively. Leo Popper and his three sons went fishing. The father admired the surrounding beauty of nature through binoculars, admired the lush vegetation, and watched roe deer grazing on the glade. The first scene of the film created a ubiquitous atmosphere of tranquility, an idyll in the bosom of undisturbed nature. The family day was crowned with a dinner made up of fried fish, which the protagonists had previously caught. The beginning of this film did not indicate any serious problems that the Popper family were to face later. Then the action moved to Prague. The director depicted Leo's professional life; his adventures were filled with problems. His work was not very successful. Initially, he failed to sell the vacuum cleaners and fridges he promoted. A breakthrough in the career of a salesman came unexpectedly. Once tired of an unfortunate day at work, he fell asleep on the bank of the river, which he had watched closely before. However, his dream did not last long, as he was awakened by a dramatic cry for help. A woman screamed terribly, because her husband was drowning, and she was unable to rescue him. The conscious Popper saved the unfortunate man in an unusual way. He threw the drowning man a cable from the vacuum cleaner and pulled him to the shore. The man was grateful for saving his life. He decided to buy two vacuum cleaners and a fridge from the salesman. He also promised Leo that he would recommend the products he sold to all his friends. The moment of saving the man's life was undoubtedly a breakthrough in the salesman's professional life. The effect of helping an influential man, as it later turned out, was an increase in the demand for the goods sold by Popper. Leo went from being an average, unobtrusive employee to the biggest star of the company and the best salesman in Czechoslovakia. Successes at work directly translated into the improvement of the standard of living for the whole family¹¹.

¹¹ O. Pavel, *Śmierć pięknych saren...*, p. 36.

Leo was able to take care of his loved ones. He took special care of his sons. For their development, he decided to buy them private boxing lessons from the current master of Czechoslovakia. The vision of long-term success changed the stabilized life of the salesman. He became more extravagant; he did not count every crown he was spending. He bought an expensive car, fulfilled his dream and became the owner of a fishpond. He also established a relationship with a famous Prague painter, who portrayed the most influential people in the country.

Popper's career was brutally interrupted by the Second World War. Initially, the entry of the Third Reich troops into Czechoslovakia did not impress him. The real threat posed by the occupation seemed to be underestimated by Leo. He was rather optimistic. Even though, he assumed that he might lose his job, but he was convinced that he would be able to support his family from carp farming. However, the biggest problem was the new regulations implemented in the occupied country. The process of Aryanization of property led to the deprivation of the Jews of their property rights and often forced them to leave the cities and move to the outskirts.

Since the arrival of the Third Reich, the Popper family led a modest, poor life in the province. Leo, with the Star of David sewn to the flap of his shirt, was working on a casual basis to provide food for his family. A great drama for the protagonist occurred when his two eldest sons were called to a concentration camp. Desperate, he decided to obtain valuable food for them, which would help them survive the exile. Taking the risk, he set off to hunt for roe deer meat. With the help of his friend Prošek and his faithful four-legged Holan, he managed to get one. Katarzyna Szkuta wrote that "This last meal of the brothers before leaving for a concentration camp is an acceptance of the gift of life from another being, but also a transfiguration of death, which may happen. The absurdity of death is replaced by a sacrifice for someone else. This sacrifice is assigned meaning and presence in the chain of life"¹².

The film ended with a scene in which two sons leave their families and are taken along with others to a concentration camp. The father, whose face reveals the hardships of life in the occupied country, watched his children go off most likely to die. The final scene sharply contrasts with the beginning of the film. The only element that connected these two parts of the film was the pair of binoculars that the father held in his hands. At the beginning of the film, he watched defenseless roe deer grazing on a glade with bated breath, while in the last scene of the film, through the same binoculars, he watched

¹² K. Szkuta, *The Sublime is now. O kategorii wzniosłości w prozie Oty Pavla*, [in:] *Z polsko-czeskich zbliżeń literackich w XX w.*, ed. J. Królak, G.P. Bąbiak, Warsaw 2008, p. 82, my translation.

innocent boys taken by the Germans to a concentration camp. The author mentioned that

The boys eat well for years to come in order to survive Teresin, Auschwitz, Mauthausen, and death marches in 30 degrees of frost, and carrying stones on the Mauthausen stairs in 30 degrees of heat, and all those wonderful things that the Germans had prepared for them. Hugo returned in quite good health. And when Jurek came from Mauthausen, he weighed forty kilos and almost died of hunger and suffering. It took half a year before he started to live again¹³.

The film adaptation of *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks* is an interesting movie showing the life of a Jewish family and the Czech Republic in constant danger. It provokes reflection on the fragility of human existence and the uncertainty as to when it will end, i.e. it refers to the most important problems of the original literary text. However, the director did not aspire to make his film an exact equivalent of the writer's fate. I think that it is not a problem of the director's lack of talent or a different type of sensitivity, that has caused him to abandon a faithful rendition of the plot of Pavel's brilliant story onto the screen. In this case we can say that Karel Kachyňa was inspired by the story and a childhood memory of Ota Pavel but was without the ambition to match the one-of-a-kind aura that accompanies reading *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks*. It is believed that Karel Kachyňa deliberately abandoned the narrative proposed by the writer in favour of his own vision of presenting the history of Leo Popper's family, with moments so captivating that it is worth living.

Pavel's childhood memories of a fragile and fleeting, but also of deep and enduring relationship between son and father, which gave a sense of happiness and nurtured him for the rest of his life, allowed the writer to survive the Holocaust, and each subsequent reader of the story certainly gains strength in a belief that "the life can be experienced like a holiday"¹⁴. I think that the director of this film, by resigning from the adaptation of a literary work, did not disappoint those viewers who had read *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks* before, while at the same time encouraging others to read Pavel's work. In an attempt to reproduce the story with the language of the camera, Kachyňa could (even unconsciously) commit betrayal, which perhaps we would not call "creative", to use the title of Alicja Helman's book on film adaptations of literature. Pavel uses such intimate words and writes about such delicate feelings as to make it hard to imagine that equivalent elements

¹³ O. Pavel, *Śmierć pięknych saren...*, p. 49.

¹⁴ M. Szczygieł, *O tym, że życie można przeżyć jak święto*, [in:] http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,124059,11648711,O_tym_ze_zycie_mozna_przezyc_jak_swieto.html (accessed 7 II 2019), my translation.

could be found in the language of film that would not be too literal for both the writer and the story's lovers.

In my opinion, the film is a successful project by Kachyňa. The director told, in his own language, a deeply moving family story of the Holocaust, in which, surprisingly, there was a place for humour. This is a simplified and altered plot in relation to the text, but it contains a message from the writer of the adapted work. After all, the film would never have been made without *The Death of the Beautiful Roebucks*, especially Ota Pavel's memorable words, which are also a *clou* for Karel Kachyňa's project:

To be able to enjoy. Everything. Do not expect that something real will happen in the future. It is possible that the real comes now, and in the future nothing more beautiful will come¹⁵.

Both the screen version and the literary work show the time of occupation of the country by the German army. The phenomenon of Aryanization, i.e. depriving the Jewish population of all private property, was presented. Under those racial laws, Popper lost access to a carp pond and a Prague apartment. The creators drew attention to the drama of the Holocaust and its consequences. On the screen one could see the stars of David worn by Jews, separating them from the rest of society. The writer recalled in his memory that

He walked down a slope and, in a spirit, saw the Germans on the plateau. They sat on trunks in front of a snow-white grove, cut bacon with bayonets and drank schnapsack. They laughed on their knees they had iron rifles, and they pulled the Jews' hair out of their heads and beards. Daddy knew that if they caught him, they would first kill him and then shoot him and throw him into the river (...)¹⁶.

In conclusion, it is worth quoting one of the authentic events, which was recalled in both the film and the story, namely the annihilation of Lidice. This village was located near Buštěhrad, where Ota Pavel and his family spent the war. In 1942, Czech and Slovak partisans assassinated Reinhard Heydrich, Protector of the Third Reich. Obergruppenführer SS died as a result of injuries. Nazi troops retaliated for Heydrich's death, razing the land of Lidice to the ground. The civilian population was exterminated. Most of the village's inhabitants were shot on the spot and some of them were taken to the concentration camp in Ravensbrück. Pavel wrote that

¹⁵ M. Szczygieł, *Láska nebeská...*, p. 32.

¹⁶ O. Pavel, *Śmierć pięknych saren...*, p. 46.

The annihilation of Lidice has shaken the whole world. But Busztegrad, my daddy, mummy, brothers, and myself, we all saw Lidice burn, we heard Lidice shouting from behind the hill; I went to school with a boy named Przygoda and now his place in the school desk was empty, we often played football there, daddy had friends there; Germans came to us for searches with bayonets on rifles. Mummy, tiny, light-haired, had to work on the Lidice fields and often returned crying, because high, thick grass grew on the graves of blood and bodies of the murdered. We will never forget about the annihilation of Lidice, they got stuck in our hearts like a tick into our skin, a tick which instead of teeth and legs has a black swastika¹⁷.

In the film, the stories of the Popper family ended when the boys were deported to a concentration camp. Kachyňa decided to finish this film by showing Leo's two sons walking with suitcases towards the German transport and his father, watching the boys with great sadness in his eyes. The final part of the film is extremely moving and touching. Pavel's collection of short stories described the fate of the Poppers through to the post-war period, which was missing in the film. In order to find out that Leo's whole family endured the hardships of war, to imagine his elderly father, who despite the tragic events, did not neglect his favourite activity of fishing, it is necessary to refer to the book.

Ota Pavel's prose has been filmed as it carries the characteristics of a universal piece that always moves the audience in front of the screen. Although the idyllic, lyrical, peaceful style of *The Death of Beautiful Roebucks* includes, fairy-tale descriptions of nature, vivid imagination and a perspective of seeing the world through the eyes of a carefree and innocent boy, proved to be a difficult challenge for the film director, the result is still satisfactory.

The director managed to take the viewer into the world of enslaved Czechoslovakia and share these dark times calmly, unpretentiously and with great sensitivity to a bad fate, which cannot be mended. It is hard not to appreciate the efforts of the filmmakers, who in a subdued way showed the viewer the whole existential and national tragedy of the events connected with the warfare of the Third Reich, while at the same time maintaining respect for the message of Ota Pavel, trying to save the beauty of his literary message on the screen. Historical background interwoven with the personal experiences of the Popper family turned out to be a moving and timeless idea of the director, bringing the trauma of the life of the Jewish community of Czechoslovakian origin closer.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 52-53.

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