

“Horse Breeding in the Austro-Hungarian Empire”

Part 1: The Human History

“Look back at our struggle for freedom,
Trace our present day’s strength to its source;
And you’ll find that man’s pathway to glory
Is strewn with the bones of a horse.”

Anonymous

Horses have a long and rich history threaded through the empires, dynasties, migrations, and wars of Europe. Most of us are not really familiar with much of the fabric of that history. A brief overview may encourage you to learn more about those distant times, people, and places. Of special interest is the unique development of the horse breeds of Hungary. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Hungarian horse was considered to be the finest cavalry mount across Europe. The Kisberer Fehér and Gidran were the mainstays of the cavalry, while the Shagya and Furioso-Northstar made significant contributions. The Nonius were used for artillery and agriculture, and the Hucul ponies and Lipizzans worked in transport and harness.

The mythic origin of the Hungarian people lies in the Turkic lands between the Urals and the Caspian Sea, and down into Persia. The original ancestors were said to be brothers, one founding the Hun tribes, the other the tribes of the Magyars. The constant quest for grazing lands and plunder led them to the Carpathian Basin and Pannonia (today’s western Hungary). There is a story that those fertile lands were won by guile. Árpád, chieftain of the Magyars, sent a white Arabian stallion, with a saddle and bridle of gold, to the ruling Slavic descendant of the Mongols, Svatopluk. When the gift was accepted, the Magyars claimed it was the purchase price of the land, grass, and water. Svatopluk, being intimidated by the fierce Magyar horseman, withdrew, and the Hungarians settled into their present domain.

Árpád leads the Magyars into Pannonia



From the Feszty diorama

The semi-nomadic Magyars plagued medieval Europe from Iberia to the English Channel, and from Italy to Greece and the Baltic, “like a knife through butter.” The ruling class of warriors brought tribute and plunder to their winter homes with their livestock-raising families on the rich grasslands of the puzsta. Ekehard, chronicler of 10th century St. Galen Monastery in Switzerland, records their exploits. Hungary’s patron, St. Stephen, the great administrator and social organizer, required each ten villages to provide a stallion and mare, plus other animals, to support the local churches. For several centuries the churches maintained breeding herds of increasing quality. Horses were the primary export commodities for the state. The daughters married off to kings and princes all across Europe were the other Hungarian political commodity.

The history of Hungary is entwined with Austria and the Habsburg family. Charlemagne was crowned Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in the year 800 a.d. His vast domain was harassed on all borders, by the Vikings on the Atlantic, Saracens in the south, and especially by the savage Avars from north of the Caucasus. The end of the Carolingian Empire coincided with the advance of the Magyars from the Asian Steppes into Central Europe. When Duke Frederic II was killed in 1246, the Swabian-Swiss Count Rudolph IV became the first Habsburg to rule the land that would eventually be known as Austria. Therefore, from its Frankish founding through the rule of the Habsburgs, Austria always had a Germanic identity.

Charles V, that enigmatic Emperor of Spain, much of the New World, and most of Europe, was descended from the Habsburg line. (The pedigrees of European nobility are agonizingly complex.) When he retired from the world to embrace a monastic life, Charles V gave the rule of Austria to his brother Ferdinand, while keeping Spain and the Netherlands for himself; thus the enduring link between Vienna, Spain, and the Netherlands was cemented. Ferdinand in turn married Anne of the Polish Jagellons, daughter of the King of Bohemia and Hungary. King Louis of Jagellon then married Ferdinand’s sister Maria. King Louis was killed by the Turks, led by Suleiman the Magnificent, at the terrible battle of Mohacs in 1526, and Ferdinand claimed the crowns of Hungary and Bohemia in addition to Austria. In this manner the 650-year rule of the Habsburgs was largely accomplished through the conquest of marriage, rather than the battlefield. “*Bella gerant alii, tu felix Austria nube.*” (Let others wage war; you, happy Austria, marry.)

However, the Ottoman Turks controlled much of Hungary for the next 150 years. Kara Mustafa laid siege to Vienna in 1628. The Turkish army, with 200,000 warriors (and an estimated 500,000 camp followers), was defeated by King John III Sobieski and his 20,000 Polish cavalymen. The fleeing Turks abandoned 30,000 head of cattle and pack animals, including horses, and one decapitated ostrich. The Christian triumph over the Turks drove the Moslems out of Central Europe.

The 16th and 17th centuries still found all of Europe embroiled in religious conflicts. The schism created by Martin Luther was reflected in the Habsburg dynasty; their heritage claimed the title of the Holy Roman Emperors and the Catholic south, but their cultural ties were bound to the northern German Protestant traditions. The Teutonic Habsburgs were isolated from their subjects, the Slavs, Croats, and Magyars. The Magyars proved particularly troublesome, always struggling for their own national autonomy. Their struggle continued into the 20th century.

The Baroque era is epitomized by the very romantic figure of Prince Franz Eugen. Born in Paris, he claimed the blood of the noble houses of Spain, Bulgaria, Italy and Czechoslovakia. A cosmopolitan Viennese, he built the beautiful Belvedere Palace there. He was a general at age 22, and a field marshal by the time he was 30. He cleared the Turkish forces from the Danube Basin and returned control of Hungary to the Habsburgs. He conquered Belgrade in 1717, giving the Austrian monarchy reign from

Transylvania to Ostend, (now western Flanders). Hungary covered nearly three times the territory of its present day borders.

The Ottoman Empire still lurked along the eastern borders. The military frontier stretched from the Adriatic to the Carpathian Mountains. All able-bodied men were required to give military service. Local civilian and paramilitary units were organized to defend the borders in the ever-shifting boundaries. They were numbered as 360,000 Croats, 240,000 Serbians, and 80,000 Rumanian men-at-arms. Magyars were noticeably absent, being too unruly for the Empire to trust. They also refused to speak German, as men in the Imperial Service were required, because the officers came from all over the Empire. Because of the language requirement, the government began institutionalized public education along with compulsory public service.

Maria Theresa, the only child of Emperor Charles VI, became Empress in 1740. Increasing conflict with Protestant Prussia marked her reign, along with the development of an extensive centralized multinational bureaucracy. It was a period of great intellectual and artistic accomplishment. Schönbrunn Palace, that masterpiece of Baroque fusion of classical European style and Oriental voluptuousness, was built to dazzle and glorify the empire. The trinity of Austria, Hungary, and Bohemia witnessed a similar fusion of creeds, faiths, races, and social systems. Estate workers had strong loyalty to the family castle and the feudal lands they governed, rather than the remote Imperial family.

Maria Theresa's son, Joseph II, furthered some legal reforms, which generally improved the civil rights of the peasantry with Vienna flourished during his rule, with the likes of Mozart gracing his Court. At the same time, a confused code of despotic rule created a powerful system of surveillance,

Joseph's reforms were greatly diluted by his successor, Leopold II. The high nobility became further removed from their subjects. The lesser nobility, especially in Hungary, had tasted a bit more freedom. Being closer to the common people on their estates, the Hungarians grew bolder demanding change toward self-rule. Napoleon's rise, after the sister Queen Maria Antoinette, threatened the existence of the monarchy. The Austrians became involved in a futile attempt to protect Habsburg satellites in Italy from Napoleon. Finally, by one of those incomprehensible twists of history, the enemies were united with the marriage of the young Archduchess Maria Louisa to Napoleon, who by this time had crowned himself Emperor of France. Liberal social ideas spread throughout the Empire. The Austrian nobility became more concerned than ever with holding on to their empire and the Habsburg dynasty. Chancellor



Emperor Joseph II

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The Hungarians saw their opportunity to agitate for political autonomy. Foremost among the reformists was Count István Széchenyi. A bad harvest and the rebellion of the conscription army in the Italian campaign lit the fuse for the fateful revolt of 1848. Led by Lajos Kossuth and the gallant General Joseph Radetsky, the Hungarians made their bid for freedom from tyranny. Inspired by the French Republic they demanded increased academic freedom in the universities, an independent legislature, and democratic reforms.

The Hungarian revolution was crushed with the aid of Tsar Nicholas of Russia. Reprisals against the Hungarians were severe. The Imperial army maintained a foundation of power in the Empire, and cleared the path to the throne for Franz Joseph, a weak ruler. An assassination attempt in 1853 further distanced the Emperor from his Hungarian subjects. He had also become estranged from his wife, the Bavarian Princess Elizabeth. The debacle of the Crimean War humiliated the Emperor. The Austro-Prussian War of 1863 saw the Austrians lose six casualties to every one for the Prussians, the result of archaic weapons and methods for waging war. The Empire was in its final decline. The constitutional dual monarchy of 1867 sealed its fate.

The cracks in the imperial edifice widened; the domain was fracturing. A convoluted administrative system evolved. Hungarian governmental entities were identified as "*Königlich*," or Royal; Austrian entities were called "K.K." for *Kaiserlich-Königlich*, and entities representing the entire empire were designated as "K und K." Empress Elizabeth had developed a passion for the Hungarian lifestyle. She loved the pastoral court life, riding to hounds in exuberant hunts. She moved her children to Budapest. Elizabeth convinced her lovesick husband to appoint Count Andrassy as Imperial Foreign Minister. Franz Joseph's frequent love letters were never able to persuade Elizabeth to return to Vienna. As a precursor to WWI, Elizabeth was murdered in 1898 while in Switzerland. With a great display of grief, people all over the Empire, including her beloved Hungarians, called her their own. Her son, Prince Rudolph, died famously at Mayerling. Elizabeth's nephew and heir to the throne, Archduke Francis Frederick, was assassinated at Sarajevo in 1914, initiating WWI and the final deathblow to the Empire.



The melodrama and intrigue of the last days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire also witnessed an economic "indian summer," with increased agricultural production due to improved methods and land use, and the consequent increase in the standard of living. The Shah of Persia attended the World Exhibition of 1873 in Vienna, riding forth from his harem on a grey horse with a red-painted tail. Otto von Bismarck of Prussia represented a growing and constant threat. There was a great demand for a steady supply of quality horses to meet the military, transport, and agricultural needs. Consequently, the Imperial Stud was well funded.

Part 2: History of the Horses

One can imagine that all of this history happened on horseback. The Habsburgs brought Andalusians and Neopolitanos from their lands in the west, along with captured Saracen Barbs from North Africa and Spain. (These are some of the same ancestors of the Lipizzan breed.) The Avars and Magyars swept in from the Central Asian Steppes on their small, swift, and sturdy “Oriental” horses. The Tartar invasions brought a further influx of Central Asian horse stock. The Turkish cavalry had hundreds of thousands of horses, brought from Syria, India, and the Caspian. Napoleon’s invaders rode African, Spanish, English, and French horses. All across the Empire, Imperial and private stud farms exchanged valued breeding stock. Somewhere in that dim, unrecorded past lie the ancestors of the all the Hungarian horse breeds.

Possibly the earliest record of the exceptional quality of the Central Asian horses is a second century B.C report given by Chang Ch’ien to the Chinese Han emperor Wu Ti. This early explorer traveled the Silk Route to the Farghana Basin in present day Uzbekistan, in search of the fabled “blood sweating horses” of the Ta Wan. The Han had heard rumors of the unlimited endurance and swiftness of these horses, and desired them for their cavalry in order to counter-attack the incursions of the Hsuing-nu (Huns), nomadic people of the Steppes. Later this same Chang Ch’ien brought other valuable horses from Sing Kiang, Afghanistan, and Persia as gifts for the emperor. In 103 B.C., a large military force led by General Li Kuang-li finally succeeded in conquering Ta Wan, and returned to China with several dozen blood sweating horses. The emperor claimed them to be the finest horses in the world.

Mongol on horseback:

The great 13th century explorer, Ibn Batutta, described a Central Asian Tarkis horse, which reminded him of the Egyptian Akadis, or crossbred, of his homeland. There are records from the 15th century of thousands of horses offered for sale on the Hungarian puzsta up into Transylvania. Contracts from the 16th century list horses with Arabic names. One such document lists Bedouin horses brought to Buda. A document from Sárvár dated in 1647, offers to pay for the capture of wild horses. These horses were small, around 14 hands, with a narrow jaw and light build; grey color dominated. Evidence suggests influence from the Akhal-Teke-Talu from the Black Sea region. They also carried the blood of horses from Arabia, Turkey, Persia, Circassia, the Caucasus, and Turkmenistan. Barbs, Andalusians, and Neopolitanos from Western Europe and Africa were mixed in. From southern Russia the Donsky and Zaporzhie horses contributed to the genetic base. These noble, larger but agile horses came to be known as “capital” horses, and were greatly sought after by the nobility. In 1574 King Henry III of France purchased a capital horse for himself from Poland.

The Hussars, Hungarian professional mercenary soldiers, began to appear in the late 14th century. In 1435 each farmstead was required to outfit 10 archers and one mounted cavalryman, indicating the increasing importance of the mounted fighter. Their battle tactics were the classic lightening charge and retreat, developed from their ancestors’ innovation of saddles with stirrups. The light cavalry, armed with saber and bow (or later the hand gun), required fast, agile, sound, and thrifty horses; just the type of horse their Magyar ancestors rode. When the Habsburgs introduced Andalusian and Neopolitano blood, they gave the capital horses more size and substance.

The wars between Hungary and the Turks limited the availability of capital horses. The Turkish occupation of vast tracts of eastern Hungarian rangeland, coupled with the heavy losses of horses in battle and from raiding parties, created a dangerous decline in the horse population. Horses could not be bred or captured fast enough to replace the losses, and the horses that were left tended to be the less desirable animals. There is a story of the king of Estonia being pulled in his carriage by his subjects, because there were no horses. By the 16th century the price of horses generally had risen, but the capital horses were in such demand they were nearly priceless. The dominance of the Habsburgs increased the export of horses from Hungary to the west. This came to an abrupt end when the Spanish importation of precious metals from the New World devalued the coinage of the realm, and resulted in a further decline in horse breeding. As land was liberated from Turkish rule, emphasis was on the production of small, sturdy farm horses needed for food production. By the 17th century, the capital horse became the dream of the horsemen of the nobility.

Oriental mare:

Empress Maria Theresa found in 1766 that military and civilian transports were in jeopardy due to the shortage of appropriate horses. She established a commission to develop stronger horses. Private stallions were restricted, and state owned stallions stood available to the public for nominal fees. Wild horse herds were banned. Joseph II expanded this program to create the stallion depot system, which still functions in some form today. Joseph established Imperial Stud Farms at Mezöhegyes in 1784 and Radautai in Bukovina in 1792. The great horseman Captain Csekonic was placed in charge of selecting horses for the Imperial Studs. He chose Tartar and Circassian mares, or “Oriental” horses. He imported English thoroughbreds for the Studs, laying the foundation for what would become the Hungarian Kisberi Felver, or halfbred, the Furioso-Northstar, and Gidran breeds. The prepotent stallion Nonius was captured from Napoleon’s army in 1816, leading to the foundation of the Nonius breed.

Emperor Joseph II established the Imperial Stud at Babolna in 1789, appointing Capt. Csekonic to direct the breeding of Arabian and Arab type horses there. Over the next 100 years several expeditions were sent into present day Syria and Arabia to purchase horses for the Imperial Studs. A number of very influential Arabian stallions were brought from those desert lands to found their own dynasties in Hungary, Poland, and other parts of the Austrian Empire. One of those expeditions returned in 1836 with the prepotent grey stallion, Shagya. He and other desert bred Arabian stallions were used on native Oriental type mares. Shagya stamped his get with his strength, size, substance, and nobility. He was honored in 1976 by the newly formed International Shagya Society (ISG), with the adoption of his name for the Hungarian Araberrasse, now known as the Shagya-Araber breed.

Hungarian Horse Breeds in Brief

The Shagya-Araber: A versatile riding, endurance, and driving horse, the Shagya breed is based largely on Arabian bloodlines imported from the desert in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Shagya is the result of 200 years of highly selective breeding standards. Developed primarily as an outcross improver for other breeds, the Shagya offers Arabian characteristics on a larger frame and more modern riding horse qualities. Shagya bloodlines are found in most of today's European sport horse breeds. Bábolna State Stud, founded in 1789, is the birthplace of the Shagya-Araber.

Kisbéri Felver: Kisbér was founded in 1858 as the main military cavalry breeding and training stud farm. The Kisbér Felver (felver means halfbred) is essentially an Anglo-Arabian with substance and good athletic qualities. The breeding goals were very similar to the development of the Trakehner. Like the Trakehner, they are not considered "warmbloods" because they have no history of the use of cold blood breeds in their foundation. Today's Kisber excels as a sport horse, particularly in combined driving, eventing, and jumping competitions. They are also doing very well in dressage, and have been used extensively to improve other Central and East European sport horse breeds.

Gidran: The Gidran is a largely chestnut Anglo-Arab breed. They were bred as a light, fast, and hardy type for a specific cavalry regiment. Siglavy-Gidran was a chestnut desertbred Arabian stallion imported in 1811. Today they are valued as eventers, and have been used to improve athletic qualities in other sport horse breeds.

Furioso-Northstar: Based on the English thoroughbred stallion Furioso, imported in 1840, and an English Norfolk roadster named Northstar, crossed on Nonius mares. Previously, Furiosos were a distinct and separate breed that was used extensively to improve other Eastern breeds. Their lines are now inextricably blended. The Furioso-Northstar is an accomplished athlete, especially in jumping and eventing. Parad is the main breeding center today, but it is a breed that is fast disappearing from Hungary. It is a breed worth preserving.

Nonius: There are two types of Nonius, the "A", or larger, heavier type, and the "B" or lighter saddle type. Both types are used extensively in draft and harness, but again, they are not cold bloods. They are a versatile riding and driving horse, energetic, and very tolerant of Hungary's hot, humid, harsh climate. The original Nonius was an Anglo-Norman stallion captured from Napoleon's army, then crossed on heavier native mares. They are primarily black, brown, or black bay, deep, muscular, and very strong. The "A" type is bred at Mezöhegyes, and the "B" at Hortobágy. Known to be very long lived.

Lipizzan: The Austro-Hungarian Empire included Piber in southern Austria and Lipica in Slovenia, the birthplace of the Lipizzan breed. Today Lipizzans are bred at Szilvásvárad in Hungary. The Hungarian Lipizzans are used primarily for harness work and driving competitions.

Hucul: A very old breed, these tough ponies come from the Carpathian Mountains. Exceptionally hardy and sure-footed, they were used extensively for farm work, packing, and riding in the rugged mountains. They are related to the ancient Tarpan of the Steppes. Today the good-tempered Huculs are valued as children's riding ponies.

Some Probable Ancestral Breeds:

Modern descendants of ancient Central Asian, African, and European breeds

Akhal-Teke: Well known as one of the most ancient of breeds, dating over 2500 years. Akhal-Teke and Turkmene horses were imported into Europe from the 17th century on. Their blood has contributed greatly to the development of the modern riding horse. Their influence is easily discerned in their characteristic long and lean body type, hardiness, and extreme endurance.

Andalusian: For over 500 years the Carthusian monks of Spain have bred the Andalusian horse. Obvious influence from the Moorish Barb type, however the horses of Iberia (Sorraia) developed well independent of outside influences for thousands of years. A major contributor to many European breeds.

Arabian: One of the oldest recorded breeds, dating back over 2000 years. There are records of Arabian horses in Britain in the 10th century A.D. The Arabian contributed to the foundations of most of the modern riding horse breeds, adding their grace, stamina, and tractable temperament.

Barb: The North African Barb was common in Europe since the 1500's, due to the ease of importation from occupied lands in Africa. Regarded as good sprinters with staying power and good strength for their size, they were widely used for cross breeding with European horses for war and racing. Sometimes confused in literature with Arabians, they are distinct in a heavier build, lower tail set, and slightly convex profile. Possibly descended from Iberian horses.

Caspian: Re-discovered in 1965, this breed probably dates back to Mesopotamia (Iran) c. 3,000 B.C. A small horse, not a pony, they have exceptionally mild temperaments and unusually long and flowing gaits. May have contributed to the origins of the Arabian and other hot-blooded breeds.

Don: The mount of the famed Cossack warriors, the Don originally was smaller, more in the type of the Tartar Nogai. Horses captured of the Karabakh, Turkmene, and Persian breeds were added, giving more height and a leaner body.

Karadin: Known in Europe as early as the 17th Century. Considered to be Central Asia's best mountain horse due to their calm temperament, sturdy, balanced frame, relatively short legs, and great endurance. From the Caucasus region.

Karabair: Bred in Uzbekistan, near Samarkand, this ancient breed is known to be very agile, with great strength and endurance. Similar to Arabians in conformation, but not so noble in appearance. Another ancient breed tracing back over 2400 years.

Karabakh: Small and fast, this is another ancient mountain horse breed from Azerbaijan. Influenced by ancient Persian and other Oriental breeds.

Iomud (or Jomud): Origins in Turkmenistan. Desert horses of legendary toughness and courage. Compact build, with overall well-balanced and muscular conformation. Smoother gaits than many of the Central Asian breeds, and a very tractable temperament. Now nearly extinct.

Lipizzan: The Habsburg-Spanish Court founded the stud at Lipica, Slovenia in 1580 with 24 mares, 3 stallions, and 6 colts from Spain. Later, Neopolitan horses were used. Developed for High School riding and carriage work. Oriental blood was introduced in the 19th century with the Oriental Siglavly stallion. **Lokai:** Bred in Tajikistan in the valleys of the Pamir Mountains, they are well adapted to high altitudes. Small, tough, and very agile, kind temperament. Some attempt is being made to revive the breed.

Marwari: Ancient breed that shows Arabian and Central Asian Turkmene influences. Developed by the Moguls (Mongols) in western India in the 12th century. The main British cavalry mount during the Raj occupation, they are fast dying out as purebreds. Small, renowned for bravery and loyalty.

Persian Arab: Thought by some to be the ancestors of the better-known desert or Syrian Arabian. Slightly heavier frame and straighter profile. Records of these horses go back to 2000 B.C., pre-dating the Arabian by 1500 years. Still bred today in parts of Iran. Noted for exceptionally good temperaments, stamina, and agility.

Thoroughbred: Founded in England during the 18th century, by three stallions – an Arab, a Barb, and a Turkmen (possibly Akhal-Teke). Showing clear evidence of the latter in their long, lean bodies. English and French thoroughbreds are generally heavier in body and frame than American racing lines. Thoroughbreds have been a major influence in virtually all modern riding horse breeds worldwide. Their greatest faults are a tendency towards a reactive temperament and lack of stamina.

Likely Contributing Breeds Now Extinct:

Neopolitano: 2500 years ago the Etruscans were breeding quality horses. Roman cavalrymen brought home horses from all over the empire, including the Orient. Barbarian invaders introduced coarser horses from the Steppes. The Spanish occupied Italy and introduces their Iberian horses. The true Italian Neopolitano is extinct, but their influence is seen especially in the Lipizzan and Kladrub breeds.

Nogai: An ancient breed of smaller stature, with short, square necks, but very strong and hardy, related to the Tarpan. Originally from the central Steppes region above the Black Sea.

Tarpan: The breed is extinct, but through selective breeding of closely related Hucul and Konik ponies the breed has been re-created in feral herds in Poland. Very economical, hardy, tough, and strong. They are believed to have contributed to the foundations of the Trakehner, Hungarian breeds, and even possibly the Arabian.

Turkoman Atti (Turkomene): From the heart of Iran, their reputation as fleet and enduring warhorses was feared by their adversaries. Thought by many to be closest to the ancestors of all modern saddle breeds. Similar in body type to the Akhal-Teke.

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