

Shagya: The Great Improver

By Suzette Bernhold and Donna J. Coss

The beautiful Shagya-Arabian breed had its beginnings in 1789, in Hungary, when Babolna stud, near Budapest, was founded as a branch of the Mezohegyes Imperial Stud farm. The original mares were chosen from those with Oriental breeding (brought in during the Turkish occupation of the area), along with Arabians, Arabian crosses, Lippizans, and a few English Thoroughbreds, all chosen with an eye towards adding size and bone to the Arabian base. The mares were hardy, typey, very refined horses with dry texture and small, beautiful heads.

Spanish stallions were used, but the most influential stallions were desert bred Arabians, among them, a particularly tall and well-formed stallion named, "Shagya", who was imported from Arabia in 1836. The Shagya breed was highly valued as officer's mounts in the Hungarian-Austrian cavalry and at the Austrian court.

Through very meticulous culling and careful breeding back only to approved purebred Arabians, over time, the Shagya has developed very specific breed characteristics with incredibly strong genetic power. Their studbook has remained intact for 200 years and breeding records indeed go back that far. The World Arabian Horse Organization (WAHO) recognizes the Shagya as distinct sub-species of Arabian. European shows have classes for Anglo-Arab or purebred Arabian and Shagya. The breed continues to influence even today's sport horses and its story is one of great trial and at times hardship.

Today's Shagya is quite different in appearance from the modern Arabian. They are larger, standing between 15 and 16.2 hands, and have much more bone, body and substance. Only purebred Arabians are allowed as an outcross into the breed, and a Purebred Shagya is not permitted to have more than seven Arabian ancestors out of sixteen, in its fourth generation. When purebred Arabian is added, the offspring must be inspected and breeding approval obtained by judges who are from the International Shagya Gesellschaft (ISG) sanctioned registries. In fact, all Shagya-Arabians must meet breeding approval! This limitation is needed to maintain the distinct type, temperament and size of the breed.

The name of the breed was set in 1978, from one outstanding desert Arabian stallion named "Shagya" who became chief sire at Babolna in 1836, and permanently stamped the breed with this size, conformation, and type.

The Hungarian breeding directors at Babolna were adamant the breed had to remain thrifty, solid, tough, sound and with good temperaments. Attitude and wonderful riding quality were traits that were particularly stressed. Stallion prospects were put into training at three and a half years of age. At four and a half, they were sent out to hunt clubs where they were screened for training, temperament, and hardiness. Those who passed were sent out on a grueling, ten-day, 480-mile endurance test. Successful candidates were test-bred to a minimum of thirty mares of varying quality for three years and the offspring were evaluated. Only those stallions that consistently improved upon the mare were permitted to be used for breeding. Mares also were required to prove their quality under saddle as well as in harness before being used for breeding stock.

In the 1930's, the Hungarians were producing 3000 Shagya bred horses each year for use by the military and as coach and riding horses. The breed's excellence in harness is widely recognized in Europe. General Tibor Petko-Szandtner's famous five-in-hand hitch of Shagya mares from Babolna toured the driving competitions of Europe in the 1930's, winning great acclaim for the skill of the driver and the magnificence of his steeds.

During World War II, the ranks of the breed were decimated by war, famine and then by mechanization. Some escaped into Western Europe, a few went behind the Iron Curtain and a few were rescued with the Lippizans when General Patton intervened. A few of these war prizes were rescued by the Hungarian Countess, Margit Sigray Besseney and brought to her home in Montana to found the base of the breed in North America.

After World War II the breed took many years to recover in Europe. Known mostly as "Arab Fajta" or "Araber Rasse" and bred only sporadically in small numbers, the breed finally began to receive recognition as a genetic goldmine by European warm blood breeders in the 1960's. Under the encouragement of Ernst Bilke, Dr. Fritz Gramatzki and Dr. Ekkehard Frielinghaus, the various representatives of the Shagya breed throughout Europe began to assemble their respective studbooks. In 1983 the Shagya-Araber Gesellschaft International e. V. (ISG) was formed to oversee the worldwide breeding of the Shagya horse.

In North America the American Shagya Arabian Verband (ASAV) exists to register horses with Shagya-Arabian bloodlines (www.shagyaregistry.com). A small but fiercely dedicated core of breeders now represents about 150 purebred and part bred horses in their books. The number of purebred Shagyas remains small in the U.S. and the majority of the mares one sees are half-Arab-half Shagya. When these mares produce offspring sired by a purebred Shagya stallion, purebred registration can be obtained if they pass a breed inspection. But the 7/16 rule still applies to future generations. The total worldwide population of this breed now numbers only around 2000 purebreds.

Originally used as a tough cavalry horse and brilliant parade mount, the Shagya has found its highest value in its use as the "great improver breed" among the European warm blood. Its heavily concentrated bloodlines have had a powerful influence on *all* modern warm blood breeds-most of whom would be very different today without this infusion of tough, but bright and elegant genetic material.

Arguably, the most influential warm blood breeding stallion of all time was the Anglo-Shagya stallion, Ramzes. Ramzes was born in Poland in 1937, the product of the English Thoroughbred stallion Rittersporn xx and the Shagya mare, Jordi. His blood flows in the veins of nearly all warm blood breeds today.

Through the Ramzes son, Conduis, a dynasty of top performance horses has been built for the Trakehner breed.

The entire Holsteiner and Westfalen "R" stallion lines were founded by Ramzes. Through Radetsky in the Westfalen breed, Ramzes produced the immortal Rembrandt. In the Dutch breed, Ramzes brought us the Grand Prix dressage line of Roemer, and the Grand Prix Jumper, Saluut II. Without this incredibly prepotent Shagya blood, it would have been impossible to develop the sport horses of today from the breeding stock of yesterday.

Another star of the breed, Burnus, born in 1948 by the Shagya stallion, Lapis, was the start of another line of great performance horses. Chosen by the late Dr. Reiner Klimke as his personal 3-day event horse, Burnus was the number one producer of show horses in Germany. Through his son, Habicht, he brought us the Olympic Bronze Medal Trakehner stallion, Peron, and also Isabel Werth's Hanoverian, Anthony FRH. He also gave us Martini, a top producer of dressage horses in the U.S. today.

Dr. Klimke's daughter, Ingrid Klimke, has teamed up with a Habicht son, the Trakehner stallion, Windfall, to win at the International levels in 3-day eventing. Windfall has been sold to the U.S.A. and is beginning a campaign by International level rider, Darren Chiacchia.

Another Habicht son, Sixtus, is an Elite Trakehner stallion in Germany. The stud farm, Horstein, places much emphasis on this bloodline, and gives credit to the Shagya influence!

The Shagya stallion, Gazal VII was born in 1944 in Babolna. He was the son of Gazal II out of I29 Shagya XXV. After an uneventful life in Communist controlled Babolna, at the age of 22, he was sold to Germany. From 1967, for eight years, Gazal VII had unparalleled beneficial influence on the Shagya breed and most performance horse breeds. His get earned the most prize money in jumping competitions. He rightly earned the title, the Shagya Stallion of the Century.

A son, Gazal VII 19 was foaled in Babolna in 1956 out of 205 Kuhailan Zaid OX. Standing for six years in Ostfriesland, he bred 626 warm blood mares and produced several approved stallions. Then leased to the Trakehner Verband, between 1968-1971, he produced 23 registered daughters, whose descendants excel in competition. One of his daughters, Heimchen was bred to Parforce, who himself has Shagya blood through Habicht and produced Phantom who in 1996 was the leading money winning Trakehner and in 1999 is still listed at the top of the Trakehner earnings list. His lifetime earnings are almost twice the earnings of other Trakehners.

He had several approved sons of which probably Polarschnee had the greatest influence. Walter Sauer took him to Australia, where he became an eventer and Grand Prix jumper. From 1984 to 1988 he stood in New Zealand and there are 119 descendants. His son, Jaegermeister out of Just Luck XX was the most successful event horse worldwide.

A new modern day dynasty is beginning with the Shagya stallion, Bajar (1969-1986). He now has sons approved for Trakehner, Oldenburg, Holsteiner, and German Riding Pony breeding. The Bajar son, Ghazzir, a purebred Shagya stallion is a very successful cross-country competitor in Germany and approved for Trakehner breeding. The Trakehner mare, White Girl, by Bajar, was named "The Best German Horse" in Combined Tests for the year 1993, and was a member of the '96 German Olympic team.

Bajar's great-grandsire, on both sides, as he was the product of a full-sibling mating, is the famous O'Bajan VII. Bajar started his career as a highly successful jumper and advanced to the M level before standing in Manfred Hansen's stud in Schleswig-Holstein. There he covered 1000 mares of different breeds and produced 800 grey foals, including 23 approved stallions.

The extreme concentration of over 200 years of very careful selection and culling has created a "blue-blood" breed of wondrous prepotency. From the beginning, the stallion selection has been done by Kuering and many purebred Shagyas have competed in 100-day tests successfully alongside warm bloods. In the U.S., Oman, Shagya stallion, sired by O'Bajar, successfully passed the 100-day test and is approved for breeding by the ISR.

In Europe at least thirty Shagya stallions have completed the 100 day stallion testing against warm bloods and all have more than 100 points. Five stallions have unlimited Trakehner breeding approval and the others may be used for Trakehner breeding with the permission of the European Verbands. The five stallions are Basar, Ghazzir, Nasrallah, Puschkin and Shagal.

There is a saying among warm blood breeders that this blood must be used like "a drop of dye in a pool of water." The strength of the genes comes through generation after generation. But over time, as the pool continues to fill, additional drops of dye must be added from time to time if that athleticism and hardiness is to be maintained.

While some of the same benefits can also be obtained by crossing in purebred Arabians, many warm blood breeders hesitate to do so. (Many pedigrees label Shagya blood "OX", so unless one knows the horses, many believe their ancestors are Arabians, when in fact they are Shagya!)

Combining Thoroughbred genes, which are predominantly Arab genes with the Shagya genes produces many desirable traits. We can observe (Jordi, Fetysz, Lapis) it is prudent to add Thoroughbred (Rittersporn, Faschingsnacht, Fenek) to produce a second generation Anglo Arab or close to it (Ramzes, Famulus, Burnus) and the breakthrough comes frequently in the third generation (Ramiro, Maharadscha, Habicht). The dams of this third generation are warm bloods, the Holsteiner, Valine or Trakehner, Marke and Hallo.

A purebred Arabian cross leads to a dramatic change in terms of substance and size. It may take several generations to return to the desired height and conformation. However, the Shagya adds the needed attributes in the next generation with no loss in size. Excellent temperament and a willing, kind attitude are always inherited in the first cross. The fact is that one can hardly find a reason not to cross with a Shagya! It is in this way that the Shagya has found its niche as "The Great Improver!" One has to wonder what the breed would have evolved to if it had not had the total devastation caused by WWII.

European breeders consider this breed to be highly prized gems, but what about the US? This breed is misunderstood and thought by many to be just another Arab like the Egyptian or the Polish Arab. It is far from that! Americans have been slow to understand and embrace this breed because of its rarity. The Shagya has been barely used at all -- and yet it fills the veins of so very many of the horses we are so eager to import!