

Preservation Breeding of the Straight Egyptian

Between Belief, Science, and Business

*by Monika Savier
photos: Monika Savier archive*

By and large, the question as to the origin of Arabian horses has stepped out of the dark of history today. Thanks to scientific methods of genetics, pedigree matters can be defined anew. However, there are still concepts from the 1960ies around that have continued to be popular up to today. Their benefit seems to be that they suggest a direction to aim at – even if it's mainly backwards – for breeders. The most irritating idea for young breeders who are looking for directional aid is that more often than not, the discussion is not about the horses themselves, but rather about their pureness of origin as of a hundred years ago. As there are lots of strictly different definitions to be found for that pureness, who is the person or organization to whom breeders will turn for interpretation? To the Pyramid Society or Al Khamza, to the Blue List, Blue Star, Asil Club, or some other Western organization that has, with

passion and the dowsing rod, taken up exploring the pure source of the origin of the Bedouin horses in the Orient.

In the words of the Arabian Horse Society in the USA: “Dedicated breeders of the Egyptian Arabian are committed to the preservation of this purest of all equine blood. To lose the purity of a single mare through careless breeding is a sin among them. Aggressive research clarifies any question concerning the purity of a Straight Egyptian pedigree. Within this group are several passionate researchers who have devoted their lives to the continued documentation of these horses”.

As intensively as pedigree research may explore and discuss the breeding methods of the Bedouin tribes, it's not able to go beyond a rather limited time bracket spanning 150, maybe 180 years. We can only make assumptions about the influences from early nomadic tribes



Arabian Horses originating from the south of the Arabian Peninsula, called NEJD.

who were horse breeders, or from the cavalry of the colonial rulers from Britain and France 200 years ago, but nobody can present positive proof about the historic pureness of the breed. Why should they? No matter what, the Arabian breed is the one we actually have on our pastures and love.

And this is ok for all the lines of the Arabian horse breed – originally and historically speaking there was a great variety of them. They race for purses, demonstrate their floating trot on the occasion of shows, or make themselves known with their performance or beauty when ridden. However, the breeders of Straight Egyptians usually have somewhat of a hard time when the historic importance of their horses cannot have priority.

Our horses' pedigrees are, more or less, history books containing lots of

anecdotes from the past. The gene pool is small, many of the breeding goals are similar, somehow all of the horses are relatives of each other. The more painful, then, to find that things take just the same course in this Straight Egyptian family that they take in any other. There are some rich and some poor relatives, some are excluded and some are successful, but all of them are from one and the same gene pool.

The horses are meant to connect us, not separate us. Discriminating some lines or individual horses will only benefit one's own business in the short term. In the era of digital communication, however, line bashing is a favorite way of pointing out the genius inherent in one's own horses, particularly in cases where beauty or functionality are below optimum level and reverting to the pedigree is a way of upgrading one's own horse.



Inspecting things more closely, it's apparent that preservation breeding based on pedigrees does not necessarily aim to improve horses by selection. In some cases, it's just the opposite that is done, the reasons being the small gene pool and the skepticism towards some of the foundation horses of Egyptian original breeding. Which is why in some studs, a pedigree is more important in breeding selection than looking at and judging the horse itself. Which, in turn, raises the question if it's not actually the good horse that upgrades the pedigree? Making too much of pureness or even super pureness, without regarding beauty and functionality, is just clever business. If there is a lack of labels or logos or famous prefixes added, good horses will just be nobodies. Labels such as Asil, Al Khamza, or Blue List appear to refer to a kind of quality seal. The term blue in

itself is suggestive of pureness, a blue sky, blue sea – with advertising likely to use this color for assumedly clean products, such as Blue Efficiency with diesel cars. Just imagine “Blue List” horses being presented in a “Red List Catalogue”! Who would still buy them?

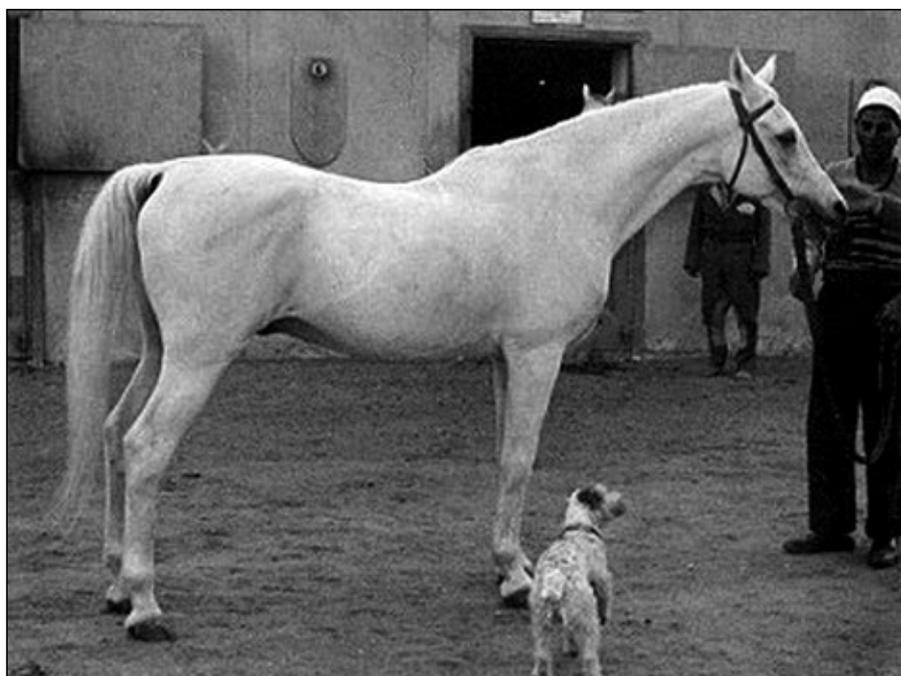
Young breeders, however, often take that kind of labeling at face value. What is more, not all Blue List horses are Straight Egyptians, and most of the Straight Egyptians are not Blue List members – take El Zahraa in Cairo, still the cradle of the Straight Egyptians, but only 25% of the horse stock there are Blue List.

Which is understandable, as the famous Blue List Catalogue was put up in order to “... encourage the preservation and increased production of the type of Arabian horse originally found in the possession of the Bedouin tribes

Famous root stock from El Zahraa State stud, Pyramid Society and also Asil Club



*The Straight Egyptian
Moniet El Nefous Family,
the most important Siglawy group
in the El Zahraa Stud*



*The Straight Egyptian Nazeer
(Mansour x Bint Samiha)
emerged as the "stallion of the century"
in the state stud of El Zahraa.
He influenced Arabian breeding
all over the World*

of Arabia..." (introduction to the Blue Arabian Horse Catalog by Mrs Jane Ott). So it was not just about, among others, Straight Egyptians, but also about Syria and Saudi Arabia as countries of origin, as Egypt was a country importing Arabian horses, too. The Egyptian pashas had a particular liking for the horses from the Nejd area, whose offspring have today become a

hype for the new breeders on the Gulf. Quite hard for young breeders to still see through and understand all of that. More experienced breeders, with their own breeding goals firmly established, take things in a more relaxed way - they know that labels come and go. Still, organizations that allot these "certificates" are much coveted, since they are social networks. Browsing Facebook

or respective blogs, you will find that many breeders go for these networks to take their first steps in breeding, to collect experiences, to communicate with peers – always hoping to obtain information and support. After all, even humans are herd animals embarking on exchange about common interests and feeding places.

I talked about this topic with long-term breeder and former WAHO (World Arabian Horse Organization) president **Dr. Hans J. Nagel**.

What is the reason for the ongoing popularity these organizations from the 1960s still enjoy today? When will scientific results gain entry into the respective discussions?

Nagel: These organizations came into

being during a time when breeding Arabian horses was in its heydays in the USA, particularly with respect to the number of horses. Times have changed dramatically. Sorry to say, the interest in Arabian horses has declined a whole lot, and in some respects, we see profound disenchantment. At the same time, there has been an enormous increase in experience, particularly scientific, during the last 50 years. Many an item that used to take its place among conjecture and assumption, or even speculation and pure imagination, can now be based on solid answers well grounded on the foundations of science. Due to this increase in knowledge, even the history of the Arabian horse today has left the atmosphere of uncertainties and



*Who would breed
be ideal Arabian Horse?*

Three very popular Straight Egyptians registered in the Pyramid Society the AsilClub, but however not found in the Blue List Catalogue



RN Farida (Salaa El Dine x Noha by Hadbahn Enzabi), Al Rayyan Farm, Qatar



NK Hafid Jamil (Ibn Nejdy x Helala by Salaa El Dine), Katharinenhof, Germany

has made its way into well-equipped laboratories where researchers have looked for solid answers and found them. Serious and interested breeders today use these undisputed facts, and the data resulting from them, for decision making and in their search for results.

If I follow your argumentation – what guidance can breeders use today?

Nagel: All official studbooks and national registries available today and bearing the acknowledging stamp of WAHO are a safe basis of orientation. Anybody who diligently studies these documents gets a good overview of

which horses may be eligible for him as a breeder, and which will not. These studbooks are the only documentation that presents reality. All studbooks have been closed for more than ten years now. No horses from outside of the existing populations can be entered any more. Arabian horse breeding stock has become a true and closed unity.

However, everything that existed in the beginning, at the time when the history of each and every Arabian horse started in the Orient, is going to stay hidden in the darkness of history forever. Whenever somebody tries to embark on a journey into these so-called pre-historic times, all the material he will



Tagweed (Gad Allah x Tee by Adl), El Zabraa State Stud, Egypt

write or otherwise broadcast is and continues to be a highly personal assessment that cannot expect to claim general validity and will not ever carry the stamp of absolute truth. Only the horses who have been entered into the studbooks, for what reason whatever, are considered acknowledged.

There are some more reliable measures that are based on scientific or technical methods. These are blood tests and DNA analysis, designed specifically for the the items in question, which are verification of dam and sire, analysis of clearly defined “markers” typical for certain breeds of horses or for populations, or using the mitochondria

method which enables us to give a definite and unbroken line of ancestry back to the last known parent.

It is to be assumed that in many institutions specializing in this kind of analysis, a lot of Arabian horses have already been subjected to these interesting methods of control, with some of the more surprising results not yet having been made common knowledge.

Does that mean that the great number of lists, logos, labels, and classification that came into existence during the history of preservation breeding can brace themselves for the fact that the new



Savier

Arabian horses bred since centuries by the Shammar tribes in greater Syria.



Savier

findings of genetics will tumble quite some of the romantic definitions of old?

Nagel: I am sure that every breeder who considers the facts is aware that the Arabian horse breed cannot be a uniform population. There are many different types. For one thing, that's due to the origin of the horses in the Orient, all of whom developed by adapting to their respective environments and who, for the other thing, went on to change because of the individual breeding goals and breeders' measures such as were later on applied in Europe or in the USA. Some decades ago, it was quite easy to determine whether an Arabian horse took its lineage from Polish, Egyptian, or Russian breeding – to name just a few – or whether some exceedingly gifted breeder had been able to create a type of his own. Such types were, for example, the Babson Arabians in the USA, or the Gainey Arabians who were very famous in their days, or the





The Egypt import JASIR (Mabrouk Manial x Negma), a Kheilan type stallion, chosen by Carl Raswan for Marbach State Stud in Germany. He left some interesting daughters, a good colt did not show up.

Crabbet Park horses in Europe. There have always been breeders and enthusiasts who preferred one of these easily recognizable types to the other, taking their bearings from these horses for their own further breeding work. The types distinguished themselves by their outward features which are ultimately based on their ancestry. However, these ancestral features are the results of breeding according to a certain breeding goal, so there was and is well-considered selection taking place here. The above mentioned groups, such as Blue List, Sheikh Obeyd, Al Khamza, and others, are not based on this kind of selection for recognizable features that go with their respective lineages, but their only point of reference is the historic documentation of pedigrees, material, private letters, and individuals' reports of their travels through the East. That way, the horse himself is of minor importance.

To put it differently: Scientifically speaking, nobody knows what percentage

of "Purebred Arabian" is actually contained in the Arabian horse breed?

Nagel: The problem is that the kind of view that is cultivated by these social groups is based on the assumption that the original Arabian horse population is what is today called purebred Arabian breed. This assumption is quite far removed from genetic and biological facts and is purely a historically based point of view. Biologically speaking, the Arabian horse population is not pure and not homogenous, as there is the variety of type already mentioned, a variety that is based on the genetic heterogeneity of the Arabian horse.

There was Mrs Ott, a German lady living in the USA, who in 1952 started to register the early imports from the Arabian peninsula and from Egypt into the USA, and who devoted herself to the origins of the Arabian horses from the Bedouin tribes. Her reference material was, almost exclusively, the travel reports of Dresden citizen Carl Reinhard Schmidt, a German, who later called himself Carl Raswan. The Blue

List and Blue Star horses are all dead, but there are the “Blue List Eligible” horses who tail their descent to Blue List horses. Categorizations such as these – are they still acceptable today, meaning almost 70 years and ten horse generations later?

Nagel: Well, if you like... even today, historical pureness is a term not systematically applied, there are obviously different degrees of pureness to be perceived. Which is what gave rise to the different categories such as the “Blue List Arabians”. Advocates of the Blue List idea are maybe following the most distinguished and most extreme representation of these various categorizations of the principle of purity.

You are right; the Arabian horses of this group were selected based on the reports of famous Carl Raswan, an Orient traveler from Germany who was in close contact with the Arabian Bedouins of the greater Syria area during the 1920ies. The results of his

studies and findings were condensed into the so-called “Raswan Index”, which many breeders, particularly in the USA, used to refer to. His index became a kind of ancestry bible. However, this index is not a manual or a scientifically based text on breeding. Carl Raswan’s basic principles were and still are highly controversial. His way of determining type, in particular, is doubtlessly far from reality and a mistaken approach for a correct understanding of the Arabian horse breed.

How about, then, the two international organizations of Pyramid Society and Asil Club?

Nagel: With the Pyramid Society and the Asil Club, which partially resembles the former, intentions and basic considerations are different. The Pyramid Society refers to the Egyptian studbook of old and to the notes of a small number of private breeders at



Lady Anne Blunt chose Egypt as a second home country. She bought the property Al Obeyd near Cairo, and changed it into her Egyptian Stud.



the time when the studbooks were consolidated in Cairo, which was about a hundred years ago. This studbook is closed now, meaning that the horses registered by the Pyramid Society have a sound basis to refer to. The Pyramid Society policy is to be an organization that is dedicated to maintaining and promoting Arabian horses of Egyptian origin, and that aims to maintain the breed in its original state.

... founding and maintaining a "breed group within the Arabian horse breed", so to speak...

Nagel: Yes, you could call it that. You could apply the same contemplations to the Asil Club, as the horses

recognized by the Asil Club are defined as particularly pure (asil), too. The expression asil, however, is somewhat irritating and leads to misunderstandings, as strictly speaking, there is not an Arabian horse that fulfills the prerequisites implied in that. The association attributes a special degree of purity to the horses accredited with them, meaning they distance themselves from other Arabian horse populations.

There was the Sheikh Obeyd group mentioned at the beginning of our interview. Their concept takes its bearings from the breeding that famous Lady Anne Blunt did in Egypt. Lady Anne turned her back on England at

the beginning of the 20th century, and as she was fascinated by the Arabian horses owned by the Egyptian upper class, she established her own breeding operation, named "Sheikh Obeyd", near Cairo. Some horses registered in the Egyptian studbook today tail back to Lady Anne Blunt's breeding in Egypt, and there are serious admirers of this quite exceptional woman who like to prefer Arabian horses who tail back to her stud.

Looking once again at the Blue List Arabians, it can be stated that this point of view is a very personal thing that was held by the founders of this tendency, Mr and Mrs Ott, and later, by their daughter Jane Ott. Therefore, it ought to be viewed and accepted as such. Quite obviously, this couple had a certain conviction that was valid for them, and insofar as further interested persons joined this group, this remains their very own, individual decision. They liked this mental approach; however, the obviously insupportable

claims of Carl Raswan that form the basis of this way of looking at things just serve to edge it into a regrettable distance from reality and from historic truth.

This kind of approach does not serve to give any clues as to the breeding of Arabian horses and to the measures necessary for maintaining this uniquely exotic breed that bases its world-wide fame on its beauty, noblesse, and grace, on its will to perform, and on its intelligence. ○

Thank you very much for this discussion!

